

STAR
WARSTM



Secret Missions Omnibus

Ryder Windham

GROSSET & DUNLAP



Star Wars Secret Missions is a work of fiction. Names, places, and incidents either are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.
Copyright © 2021 by Lucasfilm Ltd. & ® or ™ where indicated.
All Rights Reserved. Used Under Authorization.

Published in the United States by Grosset & Dunlap, an imprint of Penguin, a division of Random House, Inc., New York.
GROSSET & DUNLAP is a registered trademark and the Grosset & Dunlap colophon is a trademark of Random House, Inc.

This book contains the following stories which were published separately from 2009–2012, and are copyright © by Lucasfilm Ltd. & ® or ™ where indicated:

Star Wars: The Clone Wars: Secret Missions: Breakout Squad
Star Wars: The Clone Wars: Secret Missions: Curse of the Black Hole Pirates
Star Wars: The Clone Wars: Secret Missions: Duel at Shattered Rock
Star Wars: The Clone Wars: Secret Missions: Guardians of the Chiss Key
www.starwars.com

******Fan Printing - Not Officially Published******

This book is not to be sold or distributed!

Includes

Secret Missions: Breakout Squad

Secret Missions: Curse of the Black Hole Pirates

Secret Missions: Duel at Shattered Rock

Secret Missions: Guardians of the Chiss Key

STAR WARS Timeline



DAWN OF THE JEDI 25,793 YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope

25,793

YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope

Dawn of the Jedi
Dawn of the Jedi
Volume One: Force Storm
Volume Two: Prisoner of Bogan
Volume Three: Force War



THE OLD REPUBLIC 5,000-1,000 YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope

5,000

YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope

Tales of the Jedi
The Golden Age of the Sith
The Fall of the Sith Empire
Crosscurrent

4,000

YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope

Tales of the Jedi
Knights of the Old Republic
The Freedon Nadd Uprising
Dark Lords of the Sith
The Sith War
Redemption

3,964

YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope

Knights of the Old Republic
Volume One: Commencement
Volume Two: Flashpoint
Volume Three: Days of Fear, Nights of Anger
Volume Four: Daze of Hate, Knights of Suffering
Volume Five: Vector
Volume Six: Vindication
Volume Seven: Dueling Ambitions
Volume Eight: Destroyer
Volume Nine: Demon
War

3,956

YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope

**KNIGHTS OF THE OLD
REPUBLIC**

The Old Republic
Revan

3,951

YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope

KNIGHTS OF THE OLD REPUBLIC II: THE SITH LORDS

3,678

YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope

The Old Republic
Volume Two: Blood of the Empire

3,653

YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope

The Old Republic
Deceived
Volume One: The Threat of Peace

3,645

YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope

Red Harvest
The Old Republic
Fatal Alliance
Volume Three: The Lost Suns
Annihilation

THE OLD REPUBLIC

3,638

YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope

**THE OLD REPUBLIC:
SHADOW OF REVAN**

**THE OLD REPUBLIC: KNIGHTS
OF THE FALLEN EMPIRE**

3,630

YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope

**THE OLD REPUBLIC: KNIGHTS
OF THE ETERNAL THRONE**

2,974

YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope

Lost Tribe of the Sith
Spiral

1,032

YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope

Knight Errant
Volume One: Aflame
Knight Errant
Volume Two: Deluge
Volume Three: Escape

1,000

YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope

Darth Bane
Path of Destruction
Jedi vs. Sith
Darth Bane
Rule of Two
Dynasty of Evil



RISE OF THE SITH 1,000-22 YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope

67

YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope

Darth Plagueis

53

YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope

Jedi - The Dark Side

44

YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope

Jedi Apprentice
The Rising Force
The Dark Rival
The Hidden Past
The Mark of the Crown
The Defenders of the Dead
The Uncertain Path
The Captive Temple
The Day of Reckoning
The Fight for Truth
The Shattered Peace
Special Edition: Deceptions

43

YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope

Jedi Apprentice
The Deadly Hunter
The Evil Experiment
The Dangerous Rescue

41

YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope

Jedi Apprentice
The Ties that Bind
The Death of Hope
The Call to Vengeance
The Only Witness
The Threat Within

38

YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope

Qui-Gon and Obi-Wan
The Aurorient Express
The Last Stand on Ord Mantell

33

YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope

Jedi Council - Acts of War
Maul: Lockdown

32

YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope

Republic
Volume One: Prelude to Rebellion
Darth Maul
Episode I Adventures
Search for the Lost Jedi
The Bartokk Assassins
The Fury of Darth Maul
Jedi Emergency
The Ghostling Children
The Hunt for Anakin Skywalker
Capture Arawynne
Trouble on Tatooine
Rescue in the Core
Festival of Warriors
Pirates from Beyond the Sea
The Bongo Rally
Cloak of Deception
Darth Maul: Shadow Hunter

**EPISODE I: THE PHANTOM
MENACE**

BOUNTY HUNTER

Jango Fett - Open Seasons

Republic

Volume Two: Outlander
Volume Three: Emissaries to Malastare
Volume Four: Twilight
Infinity's End

30

YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope

Republic

Volume Five: The Hunt for Aurra Sing
Volume Six: Darkness
Volume Seven: The Stark Hyperspace War
The Devaronian Version
Volume Eight: Rite of Passage

29

YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope

Rogue Planet

28

YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope

Jedi Quest

Path to Truth
Jedi Quest

27

YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope

Outbound Flight

Jedi Quest

The Way of the Apprentice
The Trail of the Jedi
The Dangerous Games

25

YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope

Jedi Quest

The Master of Disguise
The School of Fear
The Shadow Trap
The Moment of Truth

24

YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope

Jedi Quest

The Changing of the Guard
The False Peace
Starfighter: Crossbones

Republic

Volume Nine: Honor and Duty

23

YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope

Jedi Quest

The Final Showdown
Star Wars Adventures
Hunt the Sun Runner
The Cavern of Screaming Skulls
The Hostage Princess
Jango Fett vs. the Razor Eaters
The Shape-Shifters Strike
The Warlords of Balmorra

22

YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope

JEDI STARFIGHTER

The Approaching Storm

Blood Ties: A Tale of Jango & Boba Fett

EPISODE II: ATTACK OF THE CLONES

REPUBLIC COMMANDO

THE CLONE WARS (VIDEO GAME)

Boba Fett
The Fight to Survive
Crossfire

Clone Wars

Volume One: The Defense of Kamino

Boba Fett

Maze of Deception

Hunted

Clone Wars

Volume Two: Victories and Sacrifices

Republic Commando

Hard Contact

CLONE WARS: VOLUME ONE

SkyeWalkers

Clone Wars

Volume Four: Light and Dark

The Cestus Deception

Jedi Trial

Clone Wars

Volume Three: Last Stand on Jabim
Volume Five: The Best Blades
Volume Six: On the Fields of Battle

THE CLONE WARS: THE MOVIE

THE CLONE WARS: SEASON ONE

The Clone Wars: Secret Missions
Breakout Squad
Curse of the Black Hole Pirates
Duel at Shattered Rock
Guardians of the Chiss Key

The Clone Wars

Volume One: Shipyards of Doom
Wild Space
No Prisoners
Volume Two: Crash Course

THE CLONE WARS: REPUBLIC HEROES

The Clone Wars

The Colossus of Destiny

Hero of the Confederacy

Shatterpoint

Republic Commando

Triple Zero

21

YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope

THE CLONE WARS: SEASON TWO

The Clone Wars Gambit
Stealth
Siege

The Clone Wars

The Wind Raiders of Talorann

Republic Commando

True Colors

Medstar

Battle Surgeons

Jedi Healer

THE CLONE WARS: SEASON THREE

The Clone Wars

Deadly Hands of Shon-Ju
Strange Allies
The Starcrusher Trap

THE CLONE WARS: SEASON FOUR

The Clone Wars

The Smuggler's Code
The Sith Hunters
Defenders of the Lost Temple

THE CLONE WARS: SEASON FIVE

20

YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope

General Grievous

THE CLONE WARS: SEASON SIX

Clone Wars

Volume Eight: The Last Siege, the Final Truth
Volume Seven: When They Were Brothers

Boba Fett

A New Threat

Pursuit

19

YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope

Yoda: Dark Rendezvous

CLONE WARS: VOLUME TWO

Labyrinth of Evil

EPISODE III: REVENGE OF THE SITH

Republic Commando

Order 66

Republic

Volume Nine: Endgame

Kenobi

Purge

Dark Lord: The Rise of Darth Vader

Dark Times

Volume One: The Path to Nowhere

Darth Vader

Darth Vader & The Lost Command

Imperial Commando: 501st

Dark Times

Volume Two: Parallels

Volume Three: Vector

Coruscant Nights

Jedi Twilight

Darth Vader

Darth Vader & The Ghost Prison

Dark Times

Volume Four: Blue Harvest

Volume Five: Out of the Wilderness

Volume Six: Fire Carrier

Volume Seven: A Spark Remains

18

YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope

Darth Vader

Darth Vader & The Ninth Assassin

Last of the Jedi

The Desperate Mission

Dark Warning

Underworld

Death on Naboo

A Tangled Web

Return of the Dark Side

Secret Weapon

Against the Empire

Master of Deception

Reckoning

Coruscant Nights

Streets of Shadow

Patterns of Force

The Last Jedi

17

YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope

Darth Vader

Darth Vader & Cry of Shadows

15

YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope

DROIDS

10

YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope

Droids (Marvel)

The Han Solo Trilogy

The Paradise Snare

5

YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope

Droids (Dark Horse)

Volume One: The Kalarba Adventures

Volume Two: Rebellion

Volume Three: Season of Revolt

Jabba the Hutt

The Gaar Suppoon Hit

The Hunger of Princess Nampi

The Dynasty Trap

Betrayal

The Han Solo Trilogy

The Hutt Gambit

4

YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope

The Lando Calrissian Adventures

Lando Calrissian & the Mindharp of Sharu

3

YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope

The Lando Calrissian Adventures

Lando Calrissian & the Flamewind of Oseon

Boba Fett

Enemy of the Empire

The Lando Calrissian Adventures

Lando Calrissian & the Starcave of Thonboka

THE FORCE UNLEASHED

Death Star

Agent of the Empire

Volume One: Iron Eclipse

2

YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope

Agent of the Empire

Volume Two: Hard Targets

The Han Solo Trilogy

Rebel Dawn

The Han Solo Adventures

Han Solo At Star's End

Han Solo's Revenge

Han Solo and the Lost Legacy

Adventures in Hyperspace

Fire Ring Race

Shinbone Showdown

1

YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope

THE FORCE UNLEASHED II

Star Wars Adventures

Han Solo & The Hollow Moon of Khorja

Dark Forces

Soldier for the Empire

Empire

Volume One: Betrayal

Death Troopers

Underworld - The Yavin Vassilika

Empire

Volume Two: Darklighter

EMPIRE AT WAR

X-WING

Blood Ties: Boba Fett is Dead

LETHAL ALLIANCE

DARK FORCES

Shadow Games

The Assassination of Darth Vader



THE REBELLION

0-4 YEARS AFTER

STAR WARS: A New Hope

0

**EPISODE IV:
A NEW HOPE**

**BATTLEFRONT: RENEGADE
SQUADRON**

REBEL ASSAULT

**ROGUE SQUADRON II:
ROGUE LEADER**

Tales from the Mos Eisley Cantina

Empire

Volume Three: The Imperial Perspective

**ROGUE SQUADRON III:
REBEL STRIKE**

Star Wars Missions

Assault on Yavin 4

Escape from Thyferra

Attack on Delrarkin

Destroy the Liquidator

Scoundrels

Pizzazz

The Keeper's World

The Kingdom of Ice

Star Wars Missions

Darth Vader's Return

Rogue Squadron to the Rescue

Bounty on Bonodon

Total Destruction

Rebel Force
Target
Hostage
Renegade
Firefight
Trapped

Allegiance
Rebel Force
Uprising

Empire
Volume Three: The Imperial Perspective

Classic Star Wars
Volume One: Doomworld
Volume Two: Dark Encounters

Science Adventures
Emergency in Escape Pod Four
Journey Across Planet X

Star Wars Missions
Revolt of the Battle Droids
Showdown in Mos Eisley
Bounty Hunters vs. Battle Droids
The Vactooine Disaster

Star Wars
Volume One: In the Shadow of Yavin
Volume Two: From the Ruins of Alderaan
Volume Three: Rebel Girl
Volume Four: A Shattered Hope

ROGUE SQUADRON

Galaxy of Fear
Eaten Alive
City of the Dead
Planet Plague

Empire
Volume Four: The Heart of the Rebellion
Volume Five: Allies and Adversaries
River of Chaos

Boba Fett
Man with a Mission

Galaxy of Fear
Ghost of the Jedi
Army of Terror

Empire
Volume Six: In the Shadows of their Fathers
Volume Seven: The Wrong Side of the War

Galaxy of Fear
The Brain Spiders
The Swarm

Choices of One

Rebellion
Volume One: My Brother, My Enemy
Volume Two: The Ahakista Gambit
Volume Three: Small Victories
Volume Four: Vector

Boba Fett

Galaxy of Fear
Overkill
Spore
The Doomsday Ship
Clones

Star Wars Adventures
Chewbacca & the Slavers of the Shadowlands

1 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope

Galaxy of Fear
The Hunger

THE STAR WARS HOLIDAY SPECIAL

Star Wars Missions
The Hunt for Han Solo
The Search for Grubba the Hutt
Ithorian Invasion
Togorian Trap

Empire and Rebellion
Honor Among Thieves

Galaxies: The Ruins of Dantooine

Star Wars Missions
Prisoner of the Nikto Pirates
The Monster of Dweem
Voyage to the Underworld
Imperial Jailbreak

2 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope

STAR WARS: GALAXIES

TIE FIGHTER

Splinter of the Mind's Eye

Star Wars Adventures
Princess Leia and the Royal Ransom
Boba Fett and the Ship of Fear

Epic Collection
The Newspaper Strips Volume One
The Newspaper Strips Volume Two

Empire and Rebellion
Razor's Edge

3 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope

Rebel Heist

EPISODE V: THE EMPIRE STRIKES BACK

X-WING ASSAULT

Tales of the Bounty Hunters

Star Wars Adventures
Luke Skywalker & the Treasure of the Dragonsnakes
The Will of Darth Vader

Classic Star Wars
Volume Three: Resurrection of Evil
Volume Three: Screams of the Void

X-WING VS. TIE FIGHTER

EWOKS SEASON ONE

EWOKS SEASON TWO

EWOKS: CARAVAN OF COURAGE

EWOKS: BATTLE FOR ENDOR

Classic Star Wars
Volume Five: A Fool's Bounty (#68-72)

SHADOWS OF THE EMPIRE

The Bounty Hunters: Scoundrel's Wages
Battle of the Bounty Hunters

Classic Star Wars
Volume Five: A Fool's Bounty (#73-81)

REBEL ASSAULT II: THE HIDDEN EMPIRE



THE NEW REPUBLIC 4-24 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope

4 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope

Tales from Jabba's Palace

EPISODE VI: RETURN OF THE JEDI

Mara Jade: By the Emperor's Hand

The Bounty Hunter Wars
The Mandalorian Armor
Slave Ship
Hard Merchandise

The Truce at Bakura

Classic Star Wars
Volume Six: Wookiee World
Volume Seven: Far, Far Away

Shadows of the Empire: Evolution

X-Wing: Rogue Leader

X-Wing: Rogue Squadron
Volume One: The Rebel Opposition
Volume Two: The Phantom Affair
Volume Three: Battleground: Tatooine
Volume Four: The Warrior Princess
Volume Five: Requiem for a Rogue
Volume Six: In the Empire's Service
Volume Seven: Blood and Honor
Volume Eight: Masquerade
Volume Nine: Mandatory Retirement

Jedi Prince
The Glove of Darth Vader
The Lost City of the Jedi
Zorba the Hutt's Revenge
Mission from Mount Yoda
Queen of the Empire
Prophets of the Dark Side

5 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope
Tales from the New Republic
Boba Fett
Twin Engines of Destruction
Luke Skywalker & the Shadows of Mindor
The Heart of the Jedi

JEDI KNIGHT: DARK FORCES II

Dark Forces
Rebel Agent
Jedi Knight

6 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope
X-Wing
Rogue Squadron

7 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope
X-Wing
Wedge's Gamble
The Kryptos Trap
The Bacta War
Wrath Squadron
Iron Fist
Solo Command

8 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope
The Courtship of Princess Leia
Tatooine Ghost

9 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope
Thrawn Trilogy
Heir to the Empire
Dark Force Rising
The Last Command
X-Wing
Isard's Revenge

10 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope
JEDI KNIGHT: MYSTERIES OF THE SITH

Dark Empire Trilogy
Dark Empire
Dark Empire II

Boba Fett
Bounty on Bar-Kooda
When the Fat Lady Swings
Murder Most Foul

11 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope
Dark Empire Trilogy
Empire's End

Boba Fett
Agent of Doom

Crimson Empire
Crimson Empire

The Bounty Hunters: Kenix Kil
Crimson Empire
Council of Blood

Jedi Academy
Jedi Search
Dark Apprentice
Champions of the Force
I, Jedi

12 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope
Children of the Jedi

JEDI KNIGHT II: JEDI OUTCAST

Darksaber

13 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope
X-Wing
Starfighters of Adumar
Planet of Twilight

Jedi Academy
Leviathan
Crimson Empire
Empire Lost

14 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope
The Crystal Star

JEDI KNIGHT: JEDI ACADEMY

16 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope
Black Fleet Crisis
Before the Storm
Shield of Lies
Tyrant's Nest

17 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope
The New Rebellion

18 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope
Corellian Trilogy
Ambush at Corellia
Assault at Selonia
Showdown at Centerpoint

19 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope
Hand of Thrawn
Specter of the Past
Vision of the Future
Union
Scourge

22 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope
Junior Jedi Knights
The Golden Globe
Lyric's World
Promises
Anakin's Quest
Vader's Fortress
Kenobi's Blade
Survivor's Quest

23 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope
Young Jedi Knights
Heirs of the Force
Shadow Academy
The Lost Ones
Lightsabers
Darkest Knight
Jedi Under Siege
Shards of Alderaan

24 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope
Young Jedi Knights
Diversity Alliance
Delusions of Grandeur
Jedi Bounty
The Emperor's Plague
Return to Ord Mantell
Trouble on Cloud City
Crisis on Crystal Reef



**NEW JEDI ORDER
25-36 YEARS AFTER
STAR WARS: A New Hope**

25 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope
New Jedi Order
Vector Prime

Invasion
Volume One: Refugees
Volume Two: Rescues
Volume Three: Revelations

New Jedi Order
Dark Tide: Onslaught
Dark Tide: Ruin
Agents of Chaos: Hero's Trial
Agents of Chaos: Jedi Eclipse
Chewbacca

26 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope
New Jedi Order
Balance Point
Edge of Victory: Conquest
Edge of Victory: Rebirth

27 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope

New Jedi Order
Star by Star
Dark Journey
Enemy Lines: Rebel Dream
Enemy Lines: Rebel Stand
Traitor

28 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope

New Jedi Order
Destiny's Way
Force Heretic: Remnant
Force Heretic: Refugee
Force Heretic: Reunion
The Final Prophecy

29 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope

New Jedi Order
The Unifying Force

35 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope

Dark Nest
The Joiner King

36 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope

Dark Nest
The Unseen Queen
The Swarm War



LEGACY

**40-139 YEARS AFTER
STAR WARS: A New Hope**

40 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope

Legacy of the Force
Betrayal
Bloodlines
Tempest
Exile
Sacrifice
Inferno
Fury

41 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope

Legacy of the Force
Revelation
Invincible
Crosscurrent
Riptide

43 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope

Millennium Falcon
Fate of the Jedi
Outcast
Omen
Abyss
Backlash

44 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope

Fate of the Jedi
Allies
Vortex
Conviction
Ascension
Apocalypse
X-Wing
Mercy Kill

45 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope

Crucible

137 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope

Legacy
Volume One: Broken
Volume Two: Shards
Volume Three: Claws of the Dragon
Volume Four: Alliance
Volume Five: The Hidden Temple
Volume Six: Legacy
Volume Seven: Storms
Volume Eight: Tatooine
Volume Nine: Monster
Volume Ten: Extremes

138 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope

Legacy
War

Legacy II
Volume One: Prisoner of the Floating World
Volume Two: Outcasts of the Broken Ring

139 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope

Legacy II
Volume Three: Wanted; Ania Solo
Volume Four: Empire of One

Contents

Breakout Squad	01
Curse of the Black Hole Pirates	99
Duel at Shattered Rock	215
Guardians of the Chiss Key	315

Star Wars: Clone Wars
Secret Missions

Book One
Breakout Squad

Chapter One

“What a mess!” said the first clone trooper, CT-8863, as he surveyed the wreckage of the Separatist battleship *Malevolence* through his helmet’s polarized T-visor.

“That’s putting it mildly,” said the second clone trooper, CT-4012. He turned his own helmeted head to let his gaze sweep over the area. “It’s a very, very big mess!”

The third clone trooper, CT-5177, looked around but said nothing. This didn’t surprise the others because CT-5177 seldom spoke at all.

The three troopers were virtually identical. Each wore a black, pressure-sealed body glove that was covered with plastoid with matching utility belts that carried handheld comlinks, grappling hooks, explosive grenades, and spare blaster magazines. They all moved and held their DC-15 blaster rifles the same way. Even their voices, transmitted via their helmets’ built in comm units, sounded alike.

In fact, their similarities extended right down to their genetic structure. They had been grown in cloning tanks and trained on the planet Kamino in order to serve and defend the Galactic Republic.

Ryder Windham

They were standing on a nameless, airless moon near the Kaliida Nebula, with their *Nu*-class attack shuttle resting on the scorched ground just a short distance away.

A day earlier, the moon had been a barren wasteland, but that was before Jedi General Anakin Skywalker had sent the *Malevolence* crashing into it. Now, massive metal fragments and countless bits of twisted, smoldering debris lay scattered in all directions across the lunar terrain.

“Too bad General Grievous got away,” said CT-8863. Leveling the barrel of his blaster rifle at a shredded section of the *Malevolence*’s hull, he added, “At least this battleship and its ion cannon can be crossed off our list of worries.”

“You know the old saying,” said CT-4012. “*The bigger they are...*”

“... *The bigger they explode!*” CT-8863 finished with a chuckle. CT-4012 joined in the laughter while CT-5177 merely nodded his helmeted head.

As the laughter ended, CT-4012 noticed a cylindrical scrap of metal near the toe of his right boot. He brought his foot down hard and crushed the scrap, driving it into the ground. Behind his helmet, he said, “I’ll bet Grievous is crying droid tears right now over his broken toy.”

Unexpectedly, a voice said from behind, “Don’t forget that this ‘broken toy’ destroyed dozens of Republic warships and killed thousands of allies.”

The three clone troopers turned to see who had spoken. It was their commanding clone officer, Captain Lock, who was walking toward them from the attack shuttle. They snapped to attention.

Lock’s armor was scuffed and scratched, and his battered helmet was decorated with jagged blue markings. Lock was a veteran of the Battle of Geonosis, the first skirmish between the Republic and Separatist armies, which had launched the interstellar conflict that was already known as the Clone Wars.

STAR WARS: Breakout Squad

Lock came to a stop before the three troopers. “If you’re waiting for me to say, “At ease, men, you can wait until this war is over. Our orders are to recover debris samples to confirm a report that the enemy battleship was built by Quarren Separatists at the Pammant Docks. I’m told Chancellor Palpatine himself is eager for this confirmation. Is that understood, shinies?”

“Sir! Yes, sir!” answered the troopers, including CT-5177. They all knew that Chancellor Palpatine was the elected leader of the Galactic Republic. They also knew what *shinies* meant: clone troopers like them, who still wore shiny armor because they had yet to be in combat.

“And another thing,” Lock added. “Calling you by your designation numbers takes too long. If you can’t come up with proper names for yourselves, I’ll be the one giving out nicknames. Understood?”

“Sir! Yes, sir!”

“Then let’s get cracking,” Lock said. “The sooner we find what we’re looking for, the sooner we can leave this rock.”

The troopers and Lock fanned out and began sifting through the rubble. They moved carefully and cautiously, always staying within sight of each other as they searched for debris with any kind of markings.

After nearly an hour of this tedious work, CT-4012 picked up a mostly pulverized piece of metal. He turned it over in his hands, examined it closer, then held it high over his head as he said, “Score!”

Lock and the other troopers trotted over to see what CT-4012 had found.

He held out the piece of scrap so all could see the engraved insignia on its surface.

“Well, I’ll be,” Lock said. “The insignia for the Free Dac Volunteers Engineering Corps! If that doesn’t confirm the battleship was built at Pammant, I don’t know what does. We’d better deliver this to Coruscant immediately.”

Ryder Windham

He clapped CT-4012's shoulder plate and said, "You've got sharp eyes, soldier. Maybe your nickname should be Sharp."

"Sharp?" CT-4012 repeated, testing the sound of it.

"Nothing wrong with 'Sharp'," Lock said. "It's a good name."

"Thank you, sir," said the trooper formerly known as NT-4012, his voice filled with pride.

"Let's move out," Lock said, motioning to the others to return to the shuttle.

As they walked, CT-8863 noticed a partially melted circuit board in a nearby pile of debris that he'd missed earlier. The board's exposed assembly was as exotic as it was intricate, distinguished by overlapping patterns of concentric silver rings. CT-8863 stopped to bend down and pick it up. "Sir!"

Lock, Sharp, and CT-5177 slopped in their tracks. Looking at the object in CT-8863's hand, Lock said, "What is it? More evidence of Pammant construction?"

"No, sir," said CT-8563. "That is, I don't think so, sir."

"Then why are you showing it to me?"

Hearing the impatience in Lock's voice, CT-8863 answered quickly. "Sir, I don't recognize this board as anything used by either the Separatists or the Republic."

Behind his helmet, Lock lifted his eyebrows skeptically. "You can recognize circuit boards at a glance?"

"Yes, sir," CT-8863 said. "Studying circuitry is, uh, sort of my hobby. I've never seen an assembly like this. It might mean the Separatists have a new ally that we don't know about."

Lock looked at the circuit board again. "The Jedi will probably want to have a look at it," he said. He lifted his gaze to CT-8863. "You have sharp eyes, too, but I won't have a pair of Sharps under my command. Because of your interest in technology, we'll call you Breaker."

"Breaker, sir?" CT-8863 said doubtfully. "Sorry, I don't understand. Are you suggesting that I enjoy breaking technology?"

Lock rolled his eyes. "Breaker is short for circuit breaker."

STAR WARS: Breakout Squad

“Oh.”

“It’s a good name!”

“Yes, sir!” said the newly named Breaker, who hadn’t meant to question his superior officer. “Thank you, sir.”

Turning to face CT-5177, Lock said, “As for you, I’ve got a fine nickname picked out for-”

Lock was interrupted by a rapid burst of blaster fire. A volley of energy bolts traveled from the nearest debris pile and slammed into CT-5177, sending him falling backward.

Before CT-5177 hit the ground, a battle droid lifted its damaged frame away from the debris. Sparks flew from the droid’s left hip joint as it lurched forward, angling its blaster rifle at the other troopers.

“Die, clone scum!” the droid said as it squeezed off another burst.

Lock, Sharp, and Breaker did not pause to wonder how the droid had survived the battleship’s crash. Such thoughts were not part of their training and conditioning. They responded automatically and without fear, moving quickly to swing their rifles into position and return fire on the droid.

The droid fired one burst that glanced off the armor at Sharp’s right shoulder. Sharp grunted at the impact but kept firing his own weapon. The droid’s body jerked and spun as a hail of energy bolts sheared off its head and arms. The droid’s body collapsed and its head bounced across the ground.

The bouncing head cried out, “Aw, nuts!”

Captain Lock and Breaker scrambled over to CT-5177’s fallen body. Sharp kept his rifle trained on the droid’s head until it rolled to a stop.

Facing Sharp sideways from the ground, the head repeated, “Die, clone scum!”

Sharp blasted the metal head to smithereens.

CT-5177 wasn’t moving. At least one of the droid’s shots had pierced the silent clone’s armored chest plate. Captain Lock

Ryder Windham

placed his black-gloved hand on the side of CT-5177's collar, then said, "He's alive! Let's get him back to the ship. Move!"

CT-5177 moaned as the others lifted and carried him up the attack shuttle's ramp and into the main cabin. As they entered, Captain Lock used his elbow to hit a button on the wall.

There was a loud wham as the hatch slammed shut behind them, followed by a rushing sound as compressed air quickly flowed in to fill and pressurize the cabin. CT-5177 moaned again as the troopers placed him on the metal deck.

The shuttle's clone pilot already had the engines running when Lock said, "To the *Demolisher*! Now!"

The *Demolisher* was the Republic Star Destroyer that had delivered the attack shuttle to the moon's, orbit. As the clone pilot deftly worked the controls, the shuttle lifted from the ground and its wings dropped into flight position. Then the shuttle turned its nose skyward and rose rapidly into space, heading for the waiting Destroyer.

The troopers worked fast on CT-5177. Sharp maneuvered a laser tool to shear through the wounded trooper's plastoid armor and body glove to expose his chest. Breaker removed CT-5177's helmet and slapped a transparent respirator over his mouth. Lock pulled off his own helmet as he grabbed an emergency medpac and snapped it open.

CT-5177 blinked as his helmet came off. He tried to focus on Lock's face. Like all clones, he had inherited the rugged, swarthy features of his genetic template, a bounty hunter named Jango Fett. CT-5177's forehead was covered by a sheen of sweat.

Looking at the wound on CT-5177's chest. Breaker said, "What a mess."

"That's an understatement," Sharp said. He glanced at Lock and said, "Will he live, sir?"

"No one dies unless I order them to die!" Lock said as he slapped a wide medpac over CT-5177's chest. Then he stared hard into his eyes and said, "tell me, soldier. You're not ready to say your last words, are you?"

STAR WARS: Breakout Squad

Under the respirator, CT-5177 gapped, “No, sir.”

“Good! Because if you don’t stay alive, you’ll never know your nickname!”

Chapter Two

Chancellor Palpatine leaned forward in his chair so he could have a closer look at the thing that had been placed on his desk in his suite at the Senate Office Building on the planet Coruscant. The thing was an exotic but obviously damaged circuit board, the same one that Captain Lock's squad had recovered from the *Malevolence's* crash site a day earlier.

Raising his gaze to the tall, silver-haired man who had delivered the circuit board, Palpatine said, "Are you certain of this device's origin?"

"Yes, Chancellor," said the Jedi Master Ring-Sol Ambase. "The clone squad that found it was unable to identify its manufacturer, so they sent it to Jedi Archives. I happened to be in Archives when it came in."

"And your records confirmed that it came from KynachTech Industries on Kynachi?"

"There was no need to consult records. I am very familiar with the design of technology manufactured by KynachTech. It is a personal interest. I was born on Kynachi."

Palpatine sighed. "Please, do forgive me. Master Ambase. I was under the impression that the people of Kynachi have golden hair, and I had not considered your ancestry."

STAR WARS: Breakout Squad

“An apology is unnecessary, Chancellor,” Ambase said. “The Kynachi are indeed distinguished by their hair, a characteristic that is partially the result of the Kynachi diet. Naturally, because I have spent most of my life on Coruscant, I do not share the trait.”

“Yes, naturally,” Palpatine said. “In any event, I can assume you are aware that KynachTech Industries has always insisted on manufacturing technology for entirely peaceful purposes?”

Ambase nodded.

“Then how did a KynachTech circuit board wind up on a Separatist battleship?”

“As of now, we can only speculate.”

Palpatine frowned. “It’s been nearly ten years since the Kynachi chose to become isolationists and severed ties with the Republic. Since then, they have refused to allow trade or respond to any of our transmissions.” His brow furrowed, and then he said, “I don’t suppose you have had any recent contact with your family on Kynachi?”

“I am a Jedi,” Ambase said. “I have had no contact with my biological family since I was an infant.”

Palpatine shook his head sadly. “Of course. Forgive me, I should have known better than to ask. Still, you know a good deal about your homeworld?”

“It is a Jedi’s duty to be familiar with many things. Granted, there’s not much to know about Kynachi. To the best of my knowledge, KynachTech Industries is the *only* industry on the planet except for farming.”

Palpatine rose from his desk and moved to the wide window that offered a sweeping view of Galactic City, the most expansive megatropolis in the galaxy.

As afternoon air traffic glided past his window, Palpatine said, “I was not surprised to learn that the battleship with the ion cannon was built at Pammant, but to discover that Kynachi was somehow involved ... This is most distressing.” He sighed. “Kynachi may be very remote, and her people may have chosen

Ryder Windham

isolation, but I remember it as a lovely, peaceful world. I fear that Kynachi has joined or become occupied by the Separatists.”

“There are other possibilities,” Ambase said. “Perhaps the Kynachi are unaware that KynachTech supplied technology to the Separatists. Perhaps the technology was stolen.”

“I had not considered that.” Palpatine looked away from the window to face Ambase. “But how are we to discover the truth without violating their isolation agreement or endangering the Kynachi people? How can we learn whether they need or want our help?”

Ambase was silent for a moment, then said, “A Republic ship might not be welcomed at Kynachi. An investigation would have to be very discreet. A small, covert task force, a Jedi with twelve troops, could travel by unarmed freighter to investigate KynachTech.”

“Unarmed?” Palpatine said with surprise. “Is that wise?”

“If the Separatists are already at Kynachi, and we show up in a Republic gunship, we might draw their attention immediately.

Palpatine sighed. “Yes, I suppose an unarmed freighter does have a tactical advantage,” he said. “Would you be willing to lead this mission?”

“Chancellor, that’s not my decision to-”

“But, Master Ambase, I’m sure the Jedi Council will concur that you, with your knowledge of Kynachi, would be the best choice. I will contact Master Yoda and Master Windu at once.” Before Ambase could protest, Palpatine continued, “If no one objects, might I also encourage you to consider the troops for your command?”

“Yes,” Palpatine said. “The squad who recovered the debris from the Separatist battleship and delivered it to you. They strike me as *most* resourceful.”

After leaving the Senate Office Building, Ring-Sol Ambase took a diplomatic shuttle to the Jedi Temple, an enormous structure topped by five tall spires. He went directly to the

STAR WARS: Breakout Squad

Temple's holographic training area, which was engineered for Jedi and Padawans to practice their lightsaber skills.

He made his way past several Padawans who were testing their non-lethal training lightsabers against various simulated opponents until he found a young male Jedi, a humanoid alien boy with blue skin and red eyes, who stood before holograms of three super battle droids.

The boy had hung his dark brown, hooded robe on a metal peg that jutted out from a nearby wall. He was clad in a tan tunic with matching leggings, and wore a synthetic leather utility belt and boots.

The holograms of the hulking, slope-shouldered droids raised their arms to open fire with their dual laser cannons, launching crimson energy bolts at the boy. He made a series of swift, sweeping chops through the air as his training lightsaber connected with the bolts, batting them back at the holograms.

The young Jedi had no difficulty sending a dozen bolts straight back at his attackers before he spun and leaped at them. Still in midair, he swung his blade to chop off the gun arms of two droids, then swung again as he landed on the floor, severing the droids' legs with his lightsaber. As the two droids collapsed, the third droid swiveled fast to take aim and fire at its moving target.

An energy bolt whizzed past the boy's head, but he ducked and rolled toward the last standing droid. He twisted his wrist to flick his lightsaber up through the droid's midsection, cutting it in half. As the droid's torso fell, though, his right gun arm fired.

"Stang!" the boy cursed as one of the fired energy bolts traveled straight into his right thigh. Because the energy bolts, like the droids, were merely three-dimensional constructions of light, they did not cause any physical harm, but the boy was discouraged just the same. The disabled droid fired again, trying to hit the boy but instead launching a spray of bolts at the ceiling. Rising from the floor, the boy said, "End program."

Ryder Windham

As the holographic droids vanished and the youth deactivated his training lightsaber, Ambase said. "You're improving, Nuru."

Nuru Kungurama turned his gaze to the silver-haired Jedi. He bowed and said, "Thank you, Master."

"However, please refrain from swearing. Such language is not becoming of a Jedi."

"Sorry, Master," Nuru said with another bow. Clipping his training lightsaber to his belt, he walked over to Ambase and said, "May I ask how your meeting went with the Chancellor?"

"I have been given an assignment," Ambase said. Anticipating Nuru's next question, Ambase added, "During my absence, you shall continue your training here at the Temple."

Nuru lowered his gaze to the floor.

"Do not be disappointed, Padawan. My mission may be dangerous. As capable as you are, you are still too young for combat. You understand that, don't you?"

"Yes, Master," Nuru said. Raising his eyes to meet Ambase's, he added, "But I still wish I could go with you."

Ambase studied the boy's expression, then said, "You're concerned that I ...might not return?"

Nuru nodded. "Just as Master Skaa did not return from Geonosis."

Ambase sighed as he thought of the terrific battle that had begun the Clone Wars.

"I miss your former Master, too," Ambase said. "We lost many friends on Geonosis. But if we are to honor their sacrifice, we must do what we can to help preserve and protect the Republic. Which is why I must go."

"Thank you for coming to tell me," Nuru said. "When Master Skaa left for Geonosis, he did so without saying good-bye to me. I realize that it may have made no difference if he had, but--"

"If there had been more time," Ambase interrupted, "Master Skaa would have said farewell. You know that."

Nuru was silent for a moment, then said, "When do you leave?"

STAR WARS: Breakout Squad

“Immediately. A clone squad is waiting for me now.”

“I look forward to your return, Master.”

“As do I, my Padawan,” Ambase said. He clapped the boy on the shoulder, then turned and walked off, moving past the other young Jedi trainees as he headed for the holographic training area’s exit.

As Ambase walked away, Nuru looked at the other trainees. He knew that five of them had recently lost their first Masters, too. Watching Ambase’s departing form, he wondered if he would ever see the Jedi again. And then, unexpectedly, he felt a sense of impending doom.

Nuru knew that the Force - the universal energy that gave the Jedi their power - could sometimes speak to a Jedi.

He was certain that this was such a moment. He no longer wondered whether he would ever see Master Ambase again. He was certain that Ambase would never return to Coruscant.

Unless he had some help.

Nuru grabbed his hooded robe and ran to the nearest Jedi trainee, Nat Lariats, a female Nautolan with fourteen long tentacles extending from the back of her head.

“Here, Nat,” Nuru said as he handed his training lightsaber to her. “You can have this.”

Confused, Nat said, “Why are you giving it to me?”

“Because I already built a real one,” Nuru said. Reaching into one of his robe pockets, he withdrew another lightsaber, which he promptly clipped to his belt. Before Nat could ask any more questions, Nuru pulled on his robe and ran after Ambase. But as he ran, Nuru kept his distance.

He didn’t want Ambase to know he was following him.

Chapter Three

“Look alive, Breaker and Sharp!” Captain Lock called from across the hangar in the Jedi Temple. “And say hello to your old pal!”

Breaker and Sharp were standing beside an old freighter that rested in a wide hangar within the Jedi Temple. They were already suited in their armor, except for their helmets, which they held at their sides. Both troopers turned to see Captain Lock approaching from across the hangar, with CT-5177 at his side, walking without any apparent discomfort,

Breaker smiled. “Good to see you on your feet again, CT-5177.”

CT-5177 responded with a nod.

Gesturing to CT-5177, Lock said, “I think the medics set a new record, the way they patched him up good as new.” Then he gave an expectant look at CT-5177 and said, “Go on, tell them the nickname I gave you.”

CT-5177 winced slightly, then muttered, “Chatterbox.”

“Ha!” Sharp laughed. “That’s a good one!”

“I don’t get it,” Breaker said. “CT-5177 hardly ever talks.”

Lock smirked. “It’s called *irony*, Breaker. Chatterbox is an *ironic* nickname.”

STAR WARS: Breakout Squad

Before Breaker could ask Lock to explain the meaning of irony, Ring-Sol Ambase entered the hangar. Seeing the silver-haired general who would lead their mission, Lock and the three clone troopers snapped to attention. Ambase came to a stop in front of them and said, "Captain Lock?"

"Greetings, General Ambase," Lock said. "The freighter you requested is ready for departure."

"And the rest of the task force?"

"Already on board, sir. A complement of two additional four-man squads and two pilots."

"Very good," Ambase said. "I would like to express my appreciation to the trooper who found the circuit board. Is he among them?"

"Breaker's right here. General," Lock said as he aimed a thumb at Breaker.

Ambase bowed his head to Breaker and spoke. "You are to be commended for realizing the board was an unusual design. I was informed that you study technology as a hobby?"

"Yes, General."

"Most interesting," Ambase said before turning for the freighter's boarding ramp. "I'll brief the entire team on our way to the destination."

Breaker was the last of the troopers to follow the Jedi into the freighter. He was about to raise the boarding ramp and seal the hatch when he saw a blue-skinned boy dressed in Jedi robes, running fast across the hangar, coming straight for the ramp. As the boy came up the ramp, he waved his fingers at Breaker and said, "You never saw me."

"I never saw you," Breaker said, his mind clouding under the young Jedi's power. The boy slipped past Breaker and quickly concealed himself in a nearby utility closet.

Without any memory of the boy, Breaker raised the ramp, shut the hatch, and then proceeded through a low-ceilinged corridor to the main cabin, where the other troopers and General Ambase were already strapped into their seats. As Breaker

Ryder Windham

strapped himself in across from Ambase, Ambase looked at him and said, "That's strange.,. I just had the feeling that my apprentice is nearby."

Breaker smiled and said, "I can assure you that you're the only Jedi on board, General."

A moment later, the freighter lifted off, and flew out of the hangar. It rose away from the Jedi Temple, climbing over the spires of Coruscant's highest skyscrapers until it left the atmosphere and proceeded into space.

The Duros bounty hunter was seated at a table in his shabby hotel room on Coruscant. His broad-brimmed hat tilted back on his head while he cleaned his blaster pistols, as the compact holoprojector activated.

The bounty hunter lifted his red-eyed gaze to the air above the holoprojector as the device suddenly produced a flickering blue-light image of a cowed figure.

It was the Sith Lord Darth Sidious.

"Cad Bane," Darth Sidious said, biting the words off with his grating rasp. "I require your services."

"I'm all ears," Bane said, which was something of a joke, because his bald, blue-green head was smooth at the sides. His hands continued their work on the pistols while his eyes remained fixed on the hologram.

"A freighter has just left the Jedi Temple," Darth Sidious said. "It is bound for Kynachi, and carries a Jedi General with a clone trooper task force."

"What do you want of me?"

"That depends on who survives."

"Jedi, huh?" Bane said. "My fee just went up. A lot."

"You will be well compensated," Darth Sidious said. "Go to Kynachi immediately. I will contact you with further instructions."

The hologram flickered off. Less than a minute later Bane left the room, taking his guns with him.

Chapter Four

“Is something wrong, General Ambase?” Breaker said.

Although Breaker was not an expert on the emotional behavior of any life form, he had noticed the way that Ring-Sol Ambase had been staring out the freighter’s viewport, watching the brilliant cascade of lights as the freighter traveled through hyperspace. His brow was furrowed, which Breaker believed was an indication that the Jedi was concerned or irritated.

Right after the freighter had made the jump into hyperspace, Ambase had briefed the clone task force about their mission: They were to serve as his emergency backup while he investigated the KynachTech facility on Kynachi.

During the briefing session, Ambase had not exhibited any obvious concern about the mission. Now, as he looked away from the viewport to face Breaker, he said, “It’s my apprentice.”

Confused, Breaker said, “You’re... worried about him?”

“Even though we’re already many parsecs away from Coruscant, I still have the strangest feeling that he is close by.”

Suddenly, there came a thudding sound accompanied by laughter from the main cabin, where Sharp and three other clone troopers were engaged in a contest to see who could do the most push-ups while wearing all their armor. The thudding sound came from the chin areas of the competing troopers’ helmets,

Ryder Windham

which struck the deck as they lowered themselves, and the laughter came from those watching them.

Ignoring the noise from the main cabin, Breaker faced Ambase and said, “the freighter was thoroughly inspected before we left the Jedi Temple, General. No one boarded except us.”

Ambase nodded. “You assured me of that earlier. Still, I have this nagging feeling of his presence. I wish I could explain it.”

Hoping to help, Breaker said, “We can’t send any transmissions while traveling through hyperspace, but when we reach Kynachi, would you like to contact the Jedi Temple and confirm that your apprentice is all right?”

“If a transmission can be sent without jeopardizing the mission, I would appreciate it.”

“We’ll make it a priority,” Breaker said. He was about to return to the main cabin, but then he caught himself and said, “General, if you don’t mind my asking, why didn’t your apprentice join you on this mission?”

Fixing Breaker with a quizzical expression, Ambase said, “You are a curious fellow, Breaker. But no, I don’t mind you asking. My Padawan, Nuru Kungurama, is still quite young and has never seen combat. I only recently became his Master, after his first Master died at the Battle of Geonosis. Unfortunately, my duties as a General have prevented me from spending much time with Nuru.”

Reflecting on this, Ambase said, “I wonder ... this feeling I’ve been having since we left the Temple. Perhaps it is the Force itself at work here, trying to tell me that I should have brought Nuru with me.”

“The Force, General?” Breaker said. “I really wouldn’t know anything about that.”

“Jedi are not the only ones who draw their power from the Force, Breaker.” Ambase said. “The Force flows through all living things. Even you and your fellow clones.

“I’m glad you think so, General.”

STAR WARS: Breakout Squad

Just then, a red light flashed on and off at the edge of the viewport.

Seeing the light, Breaker said, "Time to strap in again. We're about to drop out of hyperspace."

They returned to the main cabin, where Captain Lock studied a navigation console while the other troopers settled into their seats and secured their helmets.

Sharp said, "Hey, Breaker! You should have seen it. Chatterbox came in second place. Knuckles did more push-ups than any of us."

"Told you he'd win," said another clone. "Knuckles does push-ups in his sleep."

"Yeah?" Sharp said. "I bet Chatterbox would beat him at a quiet contest. Chatterbox doesn't even snore!" This comment brought on another round of laughter.

"All right, cut the chatter," Captain Lock said. Turning to Ambase, he said, "I'm going up front with the pilots. Be right back."

While Lock headed for the freighter's bridge, Ambase lowered himself into his seat. Belting himself in, he surveyed the identical troopers.

Although it remained something of a mystery how the Kamino cloners had been commissioned to create an army to serve the Republic, Ambase could not help but admire the clones' courage and camaraderie.

"Which of you are Knuckles and Chatterbox?" Ambase asked.

"I'm Knuckles, sir," one of the troopers said amiably as he secured a set of polarized macrobinoculars to his helmet. Chatterbox raised a black-gloved hand and casually saluted Ambase.

"I'm sorry I didn't see your contest," Ambase said with a smile. "When this mission is done, perhaps you'll have a rematch."

The troopers responded with enthusiastic nods.

Ryder Windham

There was a shuddering sensation as the freighter exited hyperspace and the sublight engines kicked in. The freighter was still shuddering as it emerged in realspace, in orbit of the planet Kynachi. But before the shuddering could stop, the entire ship was rocked by violent explosions.

None of the troopers showed a trace of fear as their bodies jolted against their seats. Reacting quickly and automatically, they placed their helmets over their heads, checked their seat belts, and braced themselves.

“We’re under attack!” Captain Lock’s voice sounded over the freighter’s comm. “Kynachi’s surrounded by what looks like a Trade Federation blockade! Droid fighter’s incoming at-!”

Lock’s words were cut off by a second explosion, which was followed by a rippling series of smaller blasts.

There was a roar of wind. Alarms blared. Lights flashed. Every man on the freighter knew the ship’s hull had been breached. Breaker grabbed an emergency breath mask and handed it quickly to Ambase, who drew it up over his face.

Sharp consulted a sensor in his helmet. “General Ambase? We’ve lost communication with Captain Lock and the pilots,”

All the seated troopers turned their helmeted heads to the Jedi General.

“To the escape pods,” Ambase said. “Now!”

Chapter Five

Ambase and the clones scrambled out of their seats. Another series of explosions rocked the freighter, knocking some of the troopers off their feet. An inner wall blew open, launching wide chunks of metal that crushed and killed two troopers instantly.

The power of the blast sent Knuckles tumbling down the corridor that led to the main hatch, where he saw a utility closet door fly open and a young, blue-skinned boy fall out.

Knuckles didn't recognize the boy or know how he got on board, but he immediately assumed he was a Jedi by his robed attire and the lightsaber on his belt. "Hang on!" Knuckles said as he grabbed for the boy, whose cheeks were puffed out as he held his breath in the rapidly thinning air. The boy clutched at Knuckles's armored forearm and held tight. Knuckles braced his weight against the corridor wall, then flung himself back into the main cabin, taking the boy with him toward the escape pods.

Laser fire hammered at the ship, cutting through the hull and killing another trooper. Ambase, Sharp, and four more troopers raced into one escape pod and the pod's hatch slid and a blast shield shut behind them.

Breaker was about to follow Chatterbox into a second pod when he saw Knuckles approaching with a boy clinging to his arm. Although Breaker had no recollection of his earlier

Ryder Windham

encounter with the boy, he instantly recalled his conversation with Ambase, and suspected that the boy was Ambase's Jedi apprentice.

Breaker gestured to the pod's open hatch. "In here!"

While Knuckles moved forward with the boy and air whipped at their bodies, Breaker suddenly realized that Ambase's pod had failed to jettison. He looked to a viewscreen beside the sealed blast shield. On the viewscreen, he saw Ambase, Sharp, and four other troopers within the pod.

"Controls are jammed," Sharp said via his helmet's comm unit. "Can you release us?"

Another bombardment of enemy laser fire struck the freighter. Breaker kept his balance as he threw open the cover to the emergency control box above the hatch to Ambase's pod. Breaker saw a neatly severed cable, and realized in an instant that someone had cut power to the pod's automatic release latches.

Nuru was still holding his breath as he clung to Knuckles. As they approached Breaker, Nuru sighted the nearby viewscreen, which displayed his Master seated in the disabled pod. Knowing better than to open his mouth, Nuru called out with his mind: *Master!*

On the viewscreen, Ambase's expression went wide with surprise. He turned his gaze so that he appeared to be staring straight through the blast shield that separated him from his apprentice. *Padawan?!*

Breaker was oblivious to the silent exchange between the Jedi. He pushed aside the severed cable in the control box. Without any idea of whether the manual release would even work, he wrapped his fingers around a lever and pulled down on it hard.

There was a muffled explosion as the disabled pod's separator charges detonated. The pod rocketed away from the freighter, whisking Ambase and his fellow passengers toward Kynachi.

Knuckles hauled Nuru into the open escape pod, where Chatterbox quickly slapped a breath mask over his face. Breaker was about to follow Knuckles into the pod when he saw another

STAR WARS: Breakout Squad

trooper stumble toward him from the shambles of the main cabin.

The trooper was clutching at his midsection. His armor was severely scorched, but jagged blue markings were still visible on his helmet.

“Captain Lock!” Breaker said. “We thought we’d lost you.”

Lock gasped. “Better luck ... next time, Breaker.”

“Someone tampered with the auto-release systems, sir,” Breaker said as he broke open the control box above the remaining pod. “You get in. I’ll stay behind to release the pod manually.”

Still clutching at his side, Lock lurched closer. He came to a stop when he arrived beside Breaker, peered into the pod, and saw the boy wearing a breath mask, sitting beside Chatterbox and Knuckles.

“Where,” Lock stammered, “did this jedi ... come from?”

Knuckles said, “I found him.”

Lock wheezed. “Lucky you.”

“Sir,” Breaker said. “Get in before we-”

Lock shoved Breaker into the pod, then stepped back as he hit a button to seal the hatch and blast shield. He didn’t know whether his helmet’s comm unit was still working, or if Breaker and the others could hear him, but as he reached up to access the controls for the pod’s manual release, he said, “Until I’m dead ... I’m the one ... who gives the orders.”

Lock almost slipped as he pulled the lever, but he clung to it with the last of his strength. There was a loud clacking sound, and then the second escape pod rocketed away. Lock slumped against the blast shield, angling his helmet to peer at a nearby viewscreen. He saw the pod tearing off toward Kynachi.

A moment later, there was one final explosion, and the freighter and everything on it was gone.

Breaker, Chatterbox, and Knuckles didn’t have time to ask the boy to identify himself or explain his presence on the freighter.

Ryder Windham

They were too busy clinging to the belts that held them in place against the pod's circular seat as they fell fast past the armada of dagger-winged droid starfighters.

Knuckles angled his head to glance through the viewport, which offered a spiraling view of the exploding freighter. The droid starfighters had only retreated slightly to avoid the wide spray of debris from the obliterated ship, but they were already swinging around to pursue the pod.

Knuckles said, "Where's Ambase's pod?"

Breaker hastily checked a console that should have allowed them to track the other pod. "Don't know. The console's not working," Breaker said. "Neither is the transponder for the distress signal." He reached up to whack the side of his helmet. "My helmet's long-range comm isn't working. Yours?"

Knuckles and Chatterbox checked their own built-in comms. "Ours are down, too," Knuckles said. They checked the handheld comms at their belts and found them similarly inoperative.

"We're cut off," Breaker said. "Totally."

Before anyone could comment further, the pod was slammed hard sideways. All four occupants knew that enemy fire had skimmed the pod's energy shield. Sparks showered out from the useless console near Breaker, then blossomed into flames. Chatterbox pulled an extinguisher off the wall, popped the trigger, and sprayed the fire until it was out.

Breaker tore the thin plastoid protective cover off another console. "Autopilot's been disabled." He tugged off his gloves, then began pulling at wires, trying to sort out their connection points to a circuit board.

There was a bright flash of brilliant light outside the viewport as the pod struck and penetrated Kynachi's atmosphere. The pod streaked downward through thick, gray clouds without slowing, diving straight for the planet's surface.

Watching Breaker dig into the exposed console, Knuckles asked, "What are you doing?"

STAR WARS: Breakout Squad

“Trying to extend our lives,” Breaker said, his fingers working fast at the wires.

Knuckles glanced again through the viewport to catch a dizzying glimpse of what looked like a wide expanse of rocky terrain. “Try faster.”

A spark ignited near Breaker’s fingers in the console. “Got it.”

A loud blast sounded from outside, the welcome noise of the pod’s maneuvering jets kicking in. The pod began to rotate as it fell, trying to right itself before landing, but the engine made a loud whine that sounded anything but stable. Knuckles threw a protective arm over Nuru and said, “Brace yourself.”

The pod dipped through the air, hit the ground at a slight angle with an ugly, bone-jarring thud, then bounced and rolled. The main thrusters died at the same time as the maneuvering jets broke off.

As the pod tumbled across the planet’s surface, Knuckles said, “What a ride!”

The pod skidded and spun until it finally came to a stop. It lay on its side, and its passengers heard a steady pattering sound against the hull. They looked through the hatch’s viewport, which faced up toward the sky, and saw heavy sheets of rain coming down.

Knuckles looked at the boy. “You all right?”

The boy nodded.

“We need to get out,” Knuckles said as they removed their seatbelts and secured their weapons. “Hurry. Those fighters will be here any second.”

Breaker punched a control stud to open the hatch, but the hatch remained closed. “It’s jammed.” He was about to strike the control stud again when he felt something press down on top of his armored shoulder. It was the long, black barrel of Chatterbox’s blaster rifle, which Chatterbox was aiming at the hatch.

Knuckles said to the boy, “Cover your ears.”

Ryder Windham

Breaker turned his face away from the hatch but kept his body still. Chatterbox squeezed the rifle's trigger.

There was a loud blast and the hatch exploded outward. The three troopers and the boy spilled out of the pod along with the blaster fumes, taking their weapons with them.

They found themselves standing on the hard surface of a small, shallow basin, surrounded by short hills that resembled permanently frozen waves. Rainwater splattered and streamed all around them. "Careful," Breaker said. "It's slippery."

The troopers kept their helmets on, but the boy removed his breath mask and flung it back into the pod. Knuckles snapped his macrobinoculars down over his visor to scan the rain-swept area. "126 meters in that direction," he said, pointing. "Small plastoid structure with trees for cover. No life forms."

The sound of a sonic boom came from overhead, signaling the approach of the enemy fighters. Breaker said, "Run."

They bolted from the wrecked pod. Rain pelted the troopers' armor while the boy's robes became quickly drenched. Despite his own warning, Breaker nearly slipped on the slick ground.

Knuckles glanced at the boy to make sure he didn't fall behind, but then the young Jedi had a sudden burst of speed, running so fast that it appeared his boots barely touched the ground.

Knuckles leaped over a wide puddle in his effort to keep up. A few more steps and the ground changed from hard, slippery rock to mud. Beyond the noise of rainfall and their clomping boots, they heard the distinctive scream of incoming fighters, growing louder with each passing second.

The boy was the first to reach the structure, a long hut without windows, situated amid a grove of dark green trees. Drawing the lightsaber from his belt, he activated its brilliant blue blade and drove it through the hut's thin plastoid wall, then flicked his wrist to make a wide, circular cut.

STAR WARS: Breakout Squad

He switched off the lightsaber and was about to place a kick to the cut area when Knuckles arrived at his side and kicked first, knocking the circular sheet of plastoid into the building.

Following the boy's lead, the three troopers scurried through the hole in the wall. Inside, they found two narrow aisles of shelves lined with large sacks and variously sized storage containers. A series of small vents in the ceiling were the structure's only source of illumination, but it was enough to enable them to see a sliding door on the opposite wall.

The smell was awful. Scrunching his nose, Nuru realized it was coming from the sacks. They were fertilizer bags.

Knuckles peered through the hole. "I see five starfighters," he said. "Wait. One is landing."

He watched as a droid starfighter reconfigured its wings, unfolding and extending them into long, sharp-tipped legs while it slowed its thrusters. It had barely touched down when its legs began skittering, causing it to slip and collapse against the uneven, rain-soaked ground with a loud crash.

Hearing the noise outside, the boy said, "What happened?"

Knuckles said, "Wait."

The droid hauled itself up, pivoted on one leg, then fired its thrusters as it transformed back into its flight configuration and sailed up into the stormy sky. The other starfighters shot up after it.

"They're retreating," Knuckles reported as he moved away from the wall. "The ground's too slick for them to land, at least for now."

"They'll be back soon enough," Breaker said. "And if they determine we escaped the pod, this building will be the first place they'll search. We can't stay here."

Just then, a mechanical voice spoke: "Intruder alert!" The group turned to see a small, spherical security droid emerge from one of the aisles to hover in the air before them. The droid was an old model with a bent antenna, and its compact repulsorlift

Ryder Windham

hissed as it drifted closer. Focusing its grimy photo receptors on the trespassers, the droid said, "You are not authorized to be in—"

"Stand down, droid," Breaker said. "We have authorization. Show him, Chatterbox."

Chatterbox spun his blaster rifle in his hands, seizing it by the barrel and swung it as hard as he could at the hovering droid. The rifle's butt smashed into the droid, shattering it in midair. Its pieces fell to the floor.

The boy was startled by the clone's violent action. "Why'd you do that?" the boy said. "The droid might have helped us!"

"We couldn't take that chance," Knuckles said. "Officially, we're not on this planet. That droid might have compromised our mission."

"This mission is already compromised," Breaker said. "Think about it. Our freighter's life pods were sabotaged. And the moment we dropped out of hyperspace, those starfighters were ready for us."

Unexpectedly, it was Chatterbox who spoke next, "Someone set us up."

Then Chatterbox slowly turned his helmeted head to face the boy, who was shrugging out of his wet robe.

"I wish I hadn't left that breath mask behind," the boy said. "It really stinks in here."

Knuckles and Breaker turned their own heads to follow Chatterbox's gaze. All three troopers were holding their blaster rifles so that the barrels were aimed toward the warehouse ceiling, but they shifted their weight slightly within their armor, bracing themselves for the unexpected as they studied the boy.

Although the clones were trained to serve and obey their Jedi commanders, they also knew that their greatest enemy, the Separatist leader Count Dooku was a former Jedi. They did not rule out the possibility that Dooku had secret allies in the Jedi Order.

The boy was trying to wring the water from his robe's sleeves when he realized the troopers were looking at him.

STAR WARS: Breakout Squad

“What’s wrong?” he asked.

When they didn’t immediately answer; he took a cautious step backward, and accidentally stepped on a fragment of the old security droid that the least talkative clone had destroyed.

Staring hard at the boy through his visor, Knuckles felt his muscles tense.

“By the way you handled that lightsaber of yours,” he said, his voice remarkably calm, “we don’t doubt that you’re a Jedi. But may we ask what exactly you were doing on the freighter?”

Chapter Six

The young Jedi did not fear the three troopers. He was even confident that he could evade or disable all three of them if necessary. But he was surprised by how quickly their manners had changed.

When the freighter was under attack, they had rescued him without question. Now, even though their helmets concealed their faces, he could feel their eyes boring in on him with intense suspicion. He said, "You think I'm somehow responsible for what happened?"

"I didn't say that," Knuckles said, his body still as a statue. "I asked ... What were you doing on the freighter?"

The boy kept very still, keeping his eyes fixed on Knuckles's visor. While rain drummed down on the plastoid roof above their heads, he said, "I snuck onboard the freighter just before you left Coruscant. My Master wanted me to stay at the Temple, but... I had a feeling that something might go wrong. I was hoping to help him."

Knuckles said, "Can you prove that claim?" He asked the question politely, but it still sounded like a challenge.

Before the boy could answer, Breaker noticed something a short distance behind the boy. Thinking fast, he said, "General Ambase told me his apprentice was Heckle Wiriest. Is that you?"

STAR WARS: Breakout Squad

"Heckle who?" Nuru said, confused. He shook his head. "Sorry, no. I mean... I can't imagine why Master Ambase told you that. I'm his apprentice. My name is Nuru Kungurama."

"You just passed the test," Breaker said as he relaxed his grip on his blaster rifle. Turning to the other troopers, he said, "I'll vouch for him. The General told me Kungurama's name earlier. Claimed he sensed his apprentice's presence on the ship."

But Knuckles was also confused. "Test?" he said. "Who's Heckle Wiriest?"

Breaker said, "I just spotted the words on that bag over there." He pointed to a yellow bag marked *Heckle Wiriest Fertilizer* on a shelf behind Nuru.

Knuckles and Chatterbox immediately relaxed, too. Knuckles said, "That was a clever way to make sure the boy was telling the truth, Breaker."

"Well," the boy said, "you could have just asked me my name. I would have told you ... Breaker?"

Breaker nodded. "That's me." He gestured to the other troopers. "He's Knuckles. He's Chatterbox."

Knuckles said, "Sorry to question you like that, Commander Nuru. We just had to be sure you were on the level."

"Of course," Nuru said somewhat warily. "Now, I don't know what your mission was, but... Breaker, you're the one who rewired the pod to save us, right?"

"Affirmative."

"Is there any way you can contact my Master's pod or send a message to the Jedi Temple?"

Breaker shook his head. "Our helmets have long-range comms, but they're not working. Even if they were, they wouldn't be able to transmit all the way back to the Temple. As for our mission, we were assigned to help General Ambase find out whether a company called KynachTech deliberately supplied parts for a Separatist battleship."

"But now that my Master is missing," Nuru said, "you'll help me find him. Right?"

Ryder Windham

Breaker glanced at Knuckles and Chatterbox, then returned his gaze to Nuru. "Under ordinary circumstances, Commander, that would be our first priority. But this mission was compromised. We don't even know whether the other pod made it to this planet. We need to find a way to contact the Jedi Temple and summon reinforcements."

"My Master, he is still alive," Nuru said. "I know it."

"How? Do your senses detect him?"

Nuru was silent for a moment, then said, "No, I can't sense him. But Master Ambase must have survived. I know he would have found a way."

"We'll discuss this later," Knuckles said firmly. "If we're anywhere near this building when those starfighters return, we're as good as dead. But we can't be seen walking out in the open with our armor on" He looked to Breaker and Chatterbox. "We need to wear camouflage."

Chatterbox stepped over to the nearest shelf, picked up a bag of fertilizer, and emptied its contents onto the floor. What he did next made Nuru gasp.

It was still raining outside as the four hooded figures moved away from the storage shed on Kynachi. The smallest figure tried to keep his distance from the others.

"Good thinking, Chatterbox," Knuckles said as they trudged along the edge of a farm that lay beyond the shed. "These cut-up bags make fine cowls and robes. We look just like refugees or journeymen laborers."

"You look more like three fertilizer sacks wearing clone trooper boots," Nuru said. Indeed, the troopers remained fully armored under the fetid bags, and openly carried their blaster rifles. "If you're lucky, someone might mistake you for bulky bounty hunters."

"Nothing wrong with bulky," Knuckles said.

Nuru squinched his nose. "You really stink."

STAR WARS: Breakout Squad

“That’s not a bad thing, either. People will stay away from us.”

“People?” Nuru said, rolling his eyes. “Microbes will stay away from you!””

“Even better,” Knuckles said.

They arrived at the edge of a wooded area and then proceeded into it. Nuru glanced at Breaker and said, “The troopers who were in my Master’s escape pod. Did you know them all well?”

“Chatterbox and I only served with one of them before, the one we call Sharp.”

Knuckles said, “I served with the others. Trueblood, Close-Shave, Dyre, and No-Nines. Ail good men. Why do you ask?”

“I was just wondering,” Nuru said. “I do think it’s interesting how you all distinguish each other. I mean, you’re identical. How do you tell who’s who?”

“Very carefully,” Knuckles said, grinning behind his helmet.

Nuru couldn’t tell if Knuckles was joking. Before he could comment, he heard a noise from overhead. “The droid starfighters!” he said. “They’re coming back!”

Nuru and the clones ducked and took cover behind a cluster of trees. They peered back the way they came, past the trees that grew at the farm’s outer edge.

Although their position prevented any view of their abandoned escape pod, they could still see the storage shed that had served as their temporary refuge. A moment later, the slaughters came into view, descending from the clouds.

The starfighters leveled off, then circled over the area beyond the shed, where the escape pod had crashed. Looking away from the starfighters, Breaker turned to face Nuru and said, “It won’t take them long to figure out we’re gone. We should keep mov-”

“Look!” Nuru said.

Breaker followed Nuru’s gaze to see the distant starfighters launching laser fire at the planet’s surface. Past the shed, a plume of fire and smoke rose and blossomed. Despite the distance, the explosion’s flash was so bright that Nuru squinted his red eyes.

Ryder Windham

Barely three seconds later, the sound of the explosion reached his ears as a series of crackling bursts.

The starfighters continued circling for another minute, then tore off, leaving thin trails of smoke across the sky as they headed south. When they were no longer in sight, Knuckles glanced at Chatterbox and muttered, “I think it’s safe to say they destroyed the pod.”

Chatterbox nodded.

Rising from his hiding spot behind the tree, Breaker looked back at Nuru and said, “Ready to move on, sir?”

“Yes.” Nuru lifted his gaze to the smoke trails of the departed starfighters. “I just hope my Master is all right.”

“Don’t worry,” Knuckles said. “He’s in good hands.”

Chapter Seven

“General Ambase?” Sharp said as he blinked his eyes open.

The clone trooper couldn’t see anything, only darkness. Because of the pressure across his armored chest and the way his knees were bent, he believed he was still belted into his seat in the escape pod. From the steady but off-kilter gravity, he also sensed that the pod was no longer falling, that it had come to a rest somewhere.

His helmeted head felt heavy, and there was a bitter taste in his mouth. Moving his hands to his collar so he could check the pressure seals, he realized his arms felt heavy, too.

Sharp’s gloved fingers gripped something unexpected, a sheet of flexible fabric that seemed to be draped over him.

Pulling it off his head, he saw through his visor that he was clutching an insulated blanket. One of the pod’s storage compartments had broken open and spilled out blankets and other emergency supplies.

Turning his head slightly, he surveyed the pod’s dim interior. None of the pod’s control switches or lights were on, and the main console was an exploded mess.

A thin shaft of light poured in through the pod’s viewport, which angled up toward a gray sky. Sharp could make out the

Ryder Windham

forms of his five fellow passengers - four fellow troopers and their Jedi leader, all motionless in their seats.

Ring-Sol Ambase's head was slumped to the side, an emergency breath mask secured over the lower half of his face.

"General Ambase!" Sharp said as he removed his seat belt.

Once freed, he reached out to Ambase, gently placing his gloved fingertips against the man's neck. He found himself holding his own breath as he felt for a pulse.

Just then, the clone named Dyre shifted in his seat beside Ambase. Dyre tilted his head back to look up at Sharp. Sounding dazed, he said, "The general! Is he-"

"He's alive," Sharp said, removing his fingertips from Ambase's neck.

"What happened?" Dyre said groggily as he unbuckled his seat belt.

"We landed."

"We all ... passed out?"

Sharp nodded, and the slight motion made him dizzy. "Pod sensors ... are off-line. I think ... there's a gas leak." He quickly yanked the breath mask off of Ambase's face.

Dyre said, "What're you doing?"

"Our air supply ... it's fouled," Sharp said. "Might be toxic."

As Sharp reached for a control button near the hatch, Dyre said, "Wait! We don't know ... can we breathe what's out there?"

"If we landed on Kynachi ... we'll breathe," Sharp said. "If not, we're dead." He struck the button and popped the hatch, which opened with an explosive hiss. Cool, fresh air flooded into the pod, followed by a trickle of water. Sharp peered through the hatch and commented. "Rain."

"Must be Kynachi," Dyre said. "Any idea of what region?"

"None," Sharp said as he pulled off his helmet and took a deep breath of air.

Gesturing to the wrecked control console, Dyre said, "No point looking for answers there."

STAR WARS: Breakout Squad

Just then, Trueblood, Close-Shave, and No-Nines began to stir in their seats. Sharp glanced at Dyre and said, "Check on them while I take a look outside."

Sharp placed his helmet back over his head, readied his blaster rifle, and then eased through the hatch. Rain pattered against his armor as he lowered himself down to the hard ground.

The battered pod had come to rest on a long, narrow stretch of ground that lay beneath two steep, rocky walls. A shallow stream of rainwater flowed over Sharp's feet and traveled down the length of the gorge, which was littered with large, ovoid stones.

Overhead, all he could see of the sky was a long and ominous strip of gray clouds, bordered by the tops of the facing cliffs.

From his education on Kamino he was certain he was standing at the bottom of an ancient riverbed. He adjusted his helmet's sensors, scanned the area, and confirmed that the nearest cliff wall was fifteen meters high.

Looking upstream, he saw a series of staggered ledges along the wall to his left. The ledges looked climbable.

Clacketty-clack.

The sound came from four meters to Sharp's left. He spun fast, swinging his rifle to aim its barrel in the general direction of the noise. He found himself aiming at a small creature that stood beside a puddle on a rain-spattered ground. It was an arthropod with a segmented body.

Two antennae extended from its blunt head, and its naturally armored external skeleton had a dusty color that blended easily with the surrounding rocks. It stood on four spindly legs and raised an equal number of pincer-tipped arms. Without warning, it flexed its pincers.

Clacketty-clack.

The creature appeared to be relatively harmless, but Sharp kept his rifle trained on it as he took a step forward. It reacted by skittering sideways, making a tapping sound against the ground as it moved downstream, away from Sharp.

Ryder Windham

When it reached a rock that rested about thirty meters from the pod, it ducked behind the rock and vanished.

Because the creature didn't appear to pose any threat. Sharp slung his rifle over his shoulder and then climbed back into the pod. He found Dyre had carefully removed the three other troopers' helmets. Trueblood, Close-Shave, and No-Nines looked up at Sharp as he entered, rainwater dripping off his armor.

Nodding toward the revived troopers, Dyre said, "They're all right. Just winded. No broken bones."

"We landed in a ravine," Sharp said as he removed his helmet. "Steep walls. Might make us slightly hard to find while it's raining, but we're exposed from above."

"See anything unusual?"

"A small life form. A four-clawed crustacean."

"Harmless?"

"It darted off. Seemed afraid of me."

Dyre grinned. "Better that than the other way around."

Close-Shave shook his head and muttered, "My skull... feels like it's filled with rocks."

"It'll pass," Sharp said. "Just keep taking deep breaths. I'm not sure what happened, but I'm guessing the attacking starfighters ruptured a gas hose in our pod's life-support system." He turned his gaze to Ambase's unconscious body.

Trueblood followed Sharp's gaze and said, "Why hasn't the general recovered?"

"Beats me," Sharp said, "but it could be because his physiology isn't the same as ours. We're different."

"Maybe not just different," Dyre said. He thumped his right fist against his chest plate and added, "Maybe we're tougher."

Sharp leveled his gaze at Dyre. "I doubt you'd be saying that if our superior officer were conscious."

"Sorry," Dyre said. "I meant no disrespect. Just hoping to boost morale."

STAR WARS: Breakout Squad

“Well, save the pep talks for after we’ve blasted the clankers who brought us down.”

No-Nines scowled. “That ambush couldn’t have been an accident. The droids were waiting for us in orbit. How’d they know when we’d arrive?”

Trueblood said, “Maybe we were set up. Maybe someone sabotaged our pod.”

“I’m afraid we’ll have to save speculations for later, too,” Sharp said as he unlocked Ambase’s seat buckle. “The droids must be searching for us. If we stay put, this pod will be our coffin.”

He slid back a seat cushion to reveal a storage compartment. It contained a number of supplies, including an emergency medpac, a waterproof tent, and a collapsible stretcher.

The troopers pulled on their helmets. No-Nines, Trueblood, and Close-Shave exited with their weapons, leaving Sharp and Dyre with more room to maneuver within the pod. Sharp clipped the medpac to his belt alongside two grenades.

Dyre extended the stretcher into a locked position and rested its upper end out through the hatch. They wrapped Ambase in blankets, secured him to the stretcher, and covered him with part of the tent to keep him dry. The unconscious Jedi didn’t make a sound or shift a muscle as he was carried out into the rain.

The stretcher-bearers, Sharp and Dyre, stepped away from the pod, walking carefully to avoid slipping on the ovoid stones.

While No-Nines kept his visor directed upstream and Close-Shave looked downstream, Trueblood lowered his gaze from the sky to face Sharp and Dyre as they came to a stop beside him. Trueblood said, “Which way?”

Sharp tilted his helmet to his right and all the troopers began walking upstream. When they reached the series of ledges that Sharp had seen earlier, Sharp came to a stop. The others did the same. Sharp looked at No-Nines and said, “Climb to the top, scope the area, and report back.”

Ryder Windham

The troopers' rifles were equipped to fire not only energized plasma bolts but also ascension cables that terminated with grappling hooks. No-Nines raised his rifle and fired, launching his rifle's cable upward.

The grappling hook snared the ledge at the top of the cliff, and then No-Nines set his weapon to slowly reel in the cable. Gripping the rifle with both hands and keeping its barrel aimed at the sky, he planted one foot on the wall and then began scaling the cliff's face.

As No-Nines ascended and rain continued to fall, Dyre adjusted his hands on the stretcher's grips. Looking at Sharp, Dyre said, "For all we know, there's an army of droids waiting for us up there. Might be safer to stay in this ravine. If we find any overhangs or caves, we might take shelter until we-"

Clacketty-clack.

The noise came from behind, near the abandoned escape pod. Responding to the noise, Sharp and Dyre held tight to the stretcher as they turned their heads, while Close-Shave and Trueblood spun fast with their blaster rifles.

No-Nines heard the clacking noise, too, and paused to look down. All the troopers sighted a four-clawed creature that stood about three meters away from the pod. One of the creature's antennae twitched.

Keeping his voice low, No-Nines said from above, "Everyone all right?"

Dyre responded with an affirmative hand gesture, and No-Nines resumed climbing. Keeping his gaze on the creature, Dyre said, "Sharp, is that the thing you saw before?"

"I'm not sure," Sharp said. "It looks ... bigger."

A rumbling sound came from the stream. Suddenly, dozens of ovoid stones shifted on their own, sending up sprays of water as they rolled over and extended pincer-tipped appendages to reveal they weren't stones at all.

Clacketty-clack, clacketty-clack-ck, CLACK, CLACK!

STAR WARS: Breakout Squad

The clacking noise echoed loudly through the ravine. Trueblood said, "What in the blazes?"

Keeping his voice calm, Dyre said, "Steady, boys. They might just be defending their territory, and shooting at them might alert the enemy to our loca-"

A thunderous ripple suddenly drowned out Dyre's words, and the entire stream erupted violently. The troopers stood motionless as hundreds of ovoids moved like a wave, and then the ovoids transformed, rapidly unfurling into clawed crustaceans.

Some of the creatures were directly beneath the empty escape pod, and they thrashed and undulated with such force that the pod began to rock back and forth upon their thick-shelled backs. This action was followed by the ugly sound of metal being crushed and shredded.

"Look at them!" Close-Shave said. "They're tearing into the pod like it is a snack!"

The nearest creatures snapped their claws menacingly at the troopers. Trueblood said, "What was that talk about staying in the ravine and not shooting?"

Dyre chuckled. "That's history."

Several creatures skittered forward. Close-Shave and Trueblood shot at the ground in front of them, trying to drive the creatures back. Three of the monsters didn't stop and were blasted on the spot. There was surprisingly little blood. The others paused for just a moment, then lurched forward again.

Sharp craned his neck back to view the trooper on the cliff. "No-Nines! Move!"

No-Nines climbed faster, his cable retracting into his rifle with each step.

Trueblood and Close-Shave kept firing at the creatures while Sharp and Dyre faced the wall and braced the stretcher against their utility belts, allowing each of them to hang onto the stretcher with one hand while leaving the other hand free to draw their rifles. They raised their weapons and fired at the same time,

Ryder Windham

sending their ascension cables past No-Nines to the uppermost ledge.

The instant Sharp and Dyre felt the grappling hooks take hold, they quickly repositioned their bodies, moving closer together and shifting the stretcher so Ambase rested across their midribs. Then they each moved both hands to grip their respective rifles and began following No-Nines up the cliff, carrying Ambase with them.

No-Nines reached the top of the cliff, letting his grappling hook snap back into place below the end of his rifle's barrel. Turning fast, he angled his weapon down as he gazed past the ascending Sharp and Dyre to see Trueblood and Close-Shave backing toward the wall.

Trueblood and Close-Shave were blasting everything that moved in front of them. No-Nines wasn't sure how many shots they had already fired, but from his vantage, he knew they wouldn't last two seconds if they paused to reload with fresh energy packs. He took aim and began squeezing away at his own trigger.

Trueblood and Close-Shave saw the fresh hail of energy bolts that sailed down from above and slammed into the encroaching creatures. Taking advantage of No-Nines's sniping, they elevated their rifles to launch their ascension cables up past the sides of Sharp and Dyre, who were almost at the top of the cliff.

The instant Trueblood and Close-Shave's grappling hooks took hold, they started chasing the others up the wall. The creatures snapped viciously at their heels. Before the troopers could breathe a sigh of relief, the creatures surged toward the base of the cliff and began piling up on top of each other.

Trueblood felt a claw whack the back of his left leg and glanced down to see the creatures scrambling up and over one another to reach him and Close-Shave. While No-Nines continued firing from above, Trueblood swung one foot to kick at the rising heap of deadly creatures.

"Keep moving!" Close-Shave shouted.

STAR WARS: Breakout Squad

Both Sharp and Dyre kept their gaze forward, ignoring the rain that pelted their visors as they maintained a synchronized pace up the cliff. They knew that just one wrong step could unbalance the stretcher they carried and send Ambase crashing to his death.

“No-Nines!” Dyre said through clenched teeth. “Give us a hand!”

No-Nines shifted his rifle to one hand and continued firing as he came down on one knee on the ledge above Dyre and Sharp. He extended his free hand to grab the edge of the stretcher and pulled, yanking the stretcher off of his allies and onto the ledge. A moment later, Dyre and Sharp heaved themselves up beside No-Nines and collapsed beside the stretcher.

Still gripping his rifle in one hand, No-Nines continued firing down at the growing pile of crustaceans beneath Close-Shave and Trueblood when the pile suddenly swelled, carrying the creatures higher.

No-Nines tore a grenade from his belt, popped the clip, and let the grenade fall past Close-Shave and Trueblood. The ascending troopers saw No-Nines’s actions and climbed even faster.

The grenade bounced off the backs of several creatures before it detonated. The explosion incinerated the nearest creatures and pulverized dozens more, and the shock wave launched Close-Shave and Trueblood skyward. They twisted their bodies in midair, angling to land on the ledge beside No-Nines, and crash-landed hard but unharmed.

A plume of smoke rose up from the bottom of the cliff. The surviving creatures made a horrible screeching sound as they fled, skittering back into the shadows of the ravine.

The smoke was still rising as No-Nines turned away from the ledge. He saw Sharp and Dyre kneeling beside the stretcher, checking on the still-unconscious Jedi, as Trueblood and Close-Shave pushed themselves up to their feet. He also saw something else.

Ryder Windham

“Incoming.”

A squad of Separatist vulture droid starfighters descended from the rain clouds, heading toward the troopers.

“The explosion must’ve attracted them!” Close-Shave said.

“We can’t retreat into the ravine,” Trueblood said. “There’s too many of those things still down there.”

Dyre chuckled. “I never liked retreating, anyway.” He checked his blaster rifle’s ammo pack and added, “Bring on the droids.”

“We have to protect the general,” Sharp said as the starfighters drew closer. He pointed to a rocky outcropping twenty meters away. “Come on.”

Sharp, Dyre, Trueblood, and No-Nines each used one hand to grip the stretcher while holding their rifles in their other hands. They lifted Ambase and ran for the outcropping. Close-Shave ran after them but kept his eyes on the incoming starfighters.

The troopers were still running for the rocks when the vulture droids opened fire.

Chapter Eight

Nuru, Breaker, Knuckles, and Chatterbox walked through the woods until they arrived at the top of a hill that offered a wide view of the rain-shrouded region. Knuckles pushed back the cowl of his makeshift robe and lowered his macrobinoculars over his visor to scan through the rain. “That way, he said, pointing. “A settlement. No air traffic.”

Breaker faced Nuru and said, “General Ambase informed us that Kynachi stopped allowing visitors to their world ten years ago. The spaceport is the most populated area, but no matter where we go here, we’re likely to attract attention simply because we’re strangers.”

Nuru said, “What should we do?”

“You’re the Jedi,” Knuckles said. “You tell us.”

Nuru was surprised by Knuckles's words. He suddenly realized that the troopers were looking at him not as a boy, but as their new commander. He thought for a moment. “Well, I think it would be best if we don’t all walk into the settlement together at the same time. I’ll go in with one of you.”

Breaker said, “Which one?”

“You just volunteered,” Nuru said. “You can keep your blaster pistol under that thing you call a robe, but you’ll be less conspicuous without your rifle and helmet.”

Ryder Windham

Knuckles said, "What should Chatterbox and I do?"

"Watch our backs," Nuru said. "Stay close to me and Breaker, but not too close."

"Will do," Knuckles said. Chatterbox nodded

Breaker handed his rifle to Knuckles, then pulled back his cowl and removed his helmet. As rain pattered on his bare head, he said, "Commander Nuru, I don't mean to sound rude, but ... I believe you'll be the one who might attract the most attention. I know little about Kynachi, but from what General Ambase told me about the indigenous people, I suspect red-eyed, blue-skinned beings such as you are quite unusual."

"I'm a Chiss," Nuru said matter-of-factly. "Chiss are unusual throughout most of the galaxy. But I'll do my best to stay unnoticed." He adjusted his cowl to conceal most of his face.

Breaker said, "What if someone asks how we arrived on Kynachi?"

"Trust me, Breaker," Nuru said. "The way you smell right now, no one will get close enough to ask."

We don't get strangers here much," said one of the two young men who suddenly blocked the doorway of the trading post that

Nuru and Breaker had been about to enter.

"Yeah," said the man's accomplice. "Especially strangers that smell like poodoo."

Rain had turned to drizzle by the time Nuru and Breaker arrived at the settlement, a cluster of shabby, old buildings with small windows. Most of the buildings were made of baked mud, but some had cheap plastoid additions. Despite the weather, there were a few dozen Kynachi natives outside the settlement's trading post, where vendors were selling food and other goods from tarpaulin-covered carts.

Nuru and Breaker had hoped to gather information at the trading post before the two men stopped them. The men wore ratty clothes and had foul breath. Nuru also noticed that both

STAR WARS: Breakout Squad

men had remarkably golden hair. One man had a gold mustache. The other had a scar across the bridge of his nose.

Breaker had clipped his helmet to the armor plate behind his left shoulder, and it bulged under his robe at his upper back. "I'm a farmer," Breaker said, hoping that this explanation would be sufficient to explain the stench of his robe. "I mean, I was a farmer. I'm looking for work."

"Well, mister, you look to me like you're a hunchback," said the man with the mustache. "And you just brought your hunchbacked self to the wrong place. Didn't you see the sign on your way into town? It says, NO POODOO-STINKIN' FARMERS ALLOWED."

The scarred man snickered at the same time as the mustached man reached into something in his pocket-Breaker was about to make a move that would break the man's arm and the other's nose when Nuru said, "We don't want trouble."

"We don't want trouble," the mustached man echoed with a slack expression as he removed his hand from his pocket.

"No trouble," the scarred man said. "No trouble at all." Neither had any idea that the boy was manipulating their minds.

Nuru said, "We have to go now."

"We have to go," the men said in unison as they sauntered off.

Breaker said, "That was close." Nuru looked up to Breaker and said, "You really do stink. Maybe you should wait outside while I go in and ask--"

"Hey!" a woman's voice called out. "You two!"

Nuru and Breaker turned to see a woman walking toward them from the food vendors. She wore a synthetic leather poncho, and had a set of goggles wrapped tightly around the crown of her black rain hat.

Like the departing men, she also had golden hair, which she had cut short. In her left hand, she clutched a large bag that contained vegetables she'd just bought from a vendor. As she approached, she said, "I noticed Wevil and Namnats hassling

Ryder Windham

you, and was just coming over to see if you needed help. What'd you say to make them back off like that?" She came to a stop in front of Breaker, but then she caught the smell of his robe and took a step back.

Breaker said, "I beg your pardon, ma'am?"

"Stang!" the woman said, trying not to gag. "No wonder those jerks left you alone. Did you roll in something?"

Breaker shrugged. "I'm a farmer."

She gave him a skeptical look. "If you say so," she said. "But if I didn't know better, I'd say you two were a long, long way from home."

Nuru said, "What makes you think that?"

"I've gotten to know most people around these parts, but I don't recall anyone ever mentioning a boy with blue skin and red eyes. And I'd wager that if you two pulled your hoods back, I'd see neither one of you has gold hair."

"Oh," Nuru said. "Is gold hair common on Kynachi?"

The woman snorted. "Boy, you just said a mouthful. If you don't know that the food on Kynachi makes most people's hair turn gold, you must have just arrived, and without a tour guide,"

Nuru turned to Breaker and said, "Did you know about the gold hair?"

Breaker nodded. "I was informed of that detail."

Nuru scowled. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"You didn't ask."

The woman cocked her head as her eyes flicked between Breaker and Num. "You're an odd pair," she said, and then she locked her gaze on the boy. "The way you talk to your tall friend here, I get the impression you're the one in charge."

Breaker said, "Don't be ridiculous. He's just a boy."

"That he is," the woman said. "And a most unusual looking one at that." Turning her gaze to Breaker, she said, "Tell me, what's your business on Kynachi?"

"I already told you," Breaker said. "I'm a farmer."

"Yeah? Most farmers prefer less unusual footwear."

STAR WARS: Breakout Squad

Nuru glanced at the mud-spattered white armor that covered Breaker's lower legs and feet. Breaker said, "I guess I'm just unusual."

"But not entirely," the woman said. "You're dressed just like your two shadows."

"Shadows?" Breaker said. "I don't know what you're talking--"

"I've been stuck on Kynachi for almost three years now," the woman interrupted, "and I've kept my eyes open. Also, my nose. I couldn't see the faces of the two men who followed you into town, but their robes smell just as bad as yours. I lost sight of one of them, but the other is lurking in the alley to the left of the trading post." Then she looked to Nuru and said, "Your farmer friend isn't a very good liar. How about you?"

Nuru considered his options, then said, "We are indeed a long way from home. We're looking for friends of ours, but our comms don't work."

"Of course, they don't work," the woman said, "on account of frequency-jamming tower at the spaceport. I guess you didn't know about that either?"

Nuru shook his head. "We really could use some help. Maybe there's some way we could help you, too?"

"I'm willing to listen," she said. "But as for helping you ... Well, that depends on whether you can get me off this planet." Then she turned and said, "Get your two friends. My landspeeder is around the corner. We'll go to my place."

Breaker raised his hand and slowly rolled his fingertips to his palm, signaling to the other troopers to come forward. Chatterbox and Knuckles cautiously emerged from their hiding spots and headed after the others.

As the woman led Nuru and the disguised troopers to her landspeeder, one of the food vendors reached into his pocket and removed a small comm unit. Holding the comm close to his mouth, he said in a low whisper, "Can you hear me?"

The voice on the other end said, "I'm all ears."

Ryder Windham

Examining the comm, the vendor said, "Hey, you were right! This special comm of yours, it works in spite of the frequency jammer!"

"Just like I said it would," the voice said impatiently.

"You wanted to know if I saw any strangers in town?"

"Tell me who you saw."

"Three robed men and a boy," the vendor said. "Two of the men, I couldn't see their faces, but they're carrying blaster rifles. They're leaving with a woman who runs a diner at the spaceport, not far from your hotel."

"Give me directions to the diner," said Cad Bane.

"May I ask your name?" Nuru said from the rear seat as the landspeeder accelerated away from the settlement and zoomed over an open plain.

"What?" the woman said from behind her speeder's controls. She had lowered the speeder's canopy to diminish the noxious odor of her passengers, and the repulsorlift's engine made it difficult to hear.

"Your name!"

"Lalo Gunn!"

Breaker sat in the front passenger seat beside Gunn, holding her bag of vegetables on his lap, while Nuru was scrunched in back between Knuckles and Chatterbox, who still wore their helmets. Nuru said, "I'm Nuru Kungurama. This is Breaker."

"And your masked buddies?" Gunn said over her shoulder.

"The one on my left is Chatterbox, and the other is Knuckles."

The trooper to Nuru's left responded. "Actually, I'm Knuckles."

"Sorry," Nuru said.

As Gunn guided the landspeeder around a wide hill, she said, "Those are the dopiest names I ever heard."

STAR WARS: Breakout Squad

Deciding to change the subject, Nuru said, “You’ve been on Kynachi almost three years? Why did you come to a world where visitors aren’t welcome?”

“I was in the import and export business,” she said. “I thought there was money to be made here. Boy, was I wrong. The Trade Federation controls everything here, including who comes and goes.”

“We only just learned that ourselves,” Breaker said, “We were under the impression that Kynachi chose to cut themselves off from the Republic.”

“That’s what I thought, too,” Gunn said. “It’s what the Trade Federation wants everyone to believe. They conquered this world ten years ago, and because Kynachi is so remote, no one in the Republic even noticed.”

“Ten years ago,” Nuru mused. “That would have been around the time of the Battle of Naboo. But why didn’t anyone here call for help?”

“Remember the frequency-jammer tower I mentioned? The Federation set it up at the KynachTech factory to prevent transmissions to or from Kynachi.”

Nuru said, “So, the Federation took over the factory?”

“That’s right,” Gunn said. “They use it to make droids and weapons.”

“And circuit boards,” Breaker muttered, recalling the device that had launched the troopers’ secret mission.

“What?” Gunn said, then quickly added, “Never mind. It’s too noisy with the canopy down. We’ll talk more when we get to my place.”

Twenty mutes later, Gunn’s landspeeder approached the outskirts of Kynachi’s only spaceport. Nuru could see the open-domed rooftops of the larger docking bays, which appeared to be surrounded by a wide sprawl of older buildings, similar to the ones he’d seen at the settlement. Except for a few ragged pedestrians, there was practically no one on the street.

Nuru said, “Where are all the people?”

Ryder Windham

“Most stay indoors,” Gunn said. “It’s the best way to avoid the droid patrols.”

Gunn guided the speeder past a row of deserted, empty buildings. She brought the vehicle to a stop beside a shabby-looking, snub-nosed Corellian transport that rested on its landing legs.

On the ground beneath the elevated transport’s lower hull were some spindly tables and chairs. A humanoid navigation droid with a single large central sensor node for a head was cleaning cheap drinking cups beside a hovering dining cart.

“Welcome to Gunn’s Diner,” Gunn said as she climbed out of her speeder, taking her bag of vegetables with her. “My ship used to be named the *Hasty Harpy*, but that was before we were grounded.”

Noticing the transport’s oversized thrusters and barely concealed laser cannon, Nuru said, “It looks like a smuggler’s ship.” He quickly added, “No offense.”

“None taken,” Gunn said. “Like I said: import and export.”

“Oh.”

Breaker said, “Is your ship operational?”

Gunn grinned. “She’s ready for liftoff any rime, but she wouldn’t get far so long as that blockades in orbit.” She walked over to the droid beside the dining cart and handed the bag of vegetables to him. “The blinroots are for today’s special, Teejay.”

The droid took the bag and looked at the troopers and Nuru. Speaking in a bright, happy voice, the droid said, “How delightful! Shall I prepare a table for four?”

“Just rustle up some grub, nothing fancy,” Gunn said. “We’ll be in the main cabin.”

The droid surveyed the empty seats and tables, and said sadly, “No one ever wants to eat outside.”

Then he looked up and down the street, confirmed that there wasn’t anyone else in sight, and added, “It’s a wonder that we’re still in business at all.”

STAR WARS: Breakout Squad

Gunn rolled her eyes. “You’re getting too emotional, Teejay. Keep it up, and I’ll wipe your memory.”

Breaker looked at Gunn and said, “That’s a Genetech 2JTJ personal navigation droid, isn’t it?”

“Used to be,” Gunn said. “Now Teejay’s a very frustrated waiter.”

She lowered the transport’s Landing ramp and led Nuru and the three hooded men up through the hatch into the transport’s main cabin, a spacious, low-ceilinged chamber with a cushioned bench and three seats.

“Dump your robes here,” Gunn said at the top of the ramp. “I don’t want you stinking up the whole place.”

Breaker glanced at Nuru. Nuru said, “Go ahead.”

The three troopers shrugged out of their robes and let them fall to the deck, revealing their white armor and weapons. Knuckles and Chatterbox still had their helmets on. Gunn looked the troopers up and down, then said, “Are you soldiers or something?”

Nuru said, “Don’t you know about the Republic’s clone troopers? Or the Republic’s war against the Separatists?”

“War?!” Gunn shook her head. “I don’t know what you’re talking about. Thanks to the Trade Federation’s frequency jammer, we don’t get HoloNet News on Kynachi. I don’t know anything about Separatists, but if you’re Fighting the Trade Federation, then I’m with you.” She looked at the troopers. “Clones, huh? Do you all look alike?”

Nuru gave a nod to Knuckles and Chatterbox, prompting them to remove their helmets.

“Whoa,” Gunn said as she looked at their faces. She glanced at Breaker, just to confirm that the three men were identical, then looked back to Nuru. “Now, that’s something I’ve never seen before. How do you tell them apart?”

“Well, Knuckles has slightly broader shoulders.”

Knuckles aimed a thumb at his chest and said, “I can do the most push-ups.”

Ryder Windham

“That’s nice,” Gunn said without enthusiasm.

“And Chatterbox,” Nuru continued, “well, he hardly ever says anything.”

“Even nicer,” Gunn said as she appraised the silent trooper. “I like men who keep their mouths shut.”

Breaker and Knuckles were baffled by Gunn’s comment. They looked at Chatterbox to see if he could offer an explanation, but he just, shrugged.

Gunn faced Nuru and said, “So, if they’re Republic soldiers, what exactly are you to them?”

Nuru blushed. “Well, I’m a Jedi. That is, I’m a Jedi apprentice, and my Master was-”

Nuru was interrupted by the distinctive sound of a rapid exchange of blaster fire. The noise came from outside the grounded transport. Startled, Nuru spun fast to look at the three troopers.

Knuckles said, “Doesn’t sound good. Stay here, Commander!” Then Knuckles ran for the open hatch that led to the landing platform. He was only halfway down when he turned and came running back into the cabin. “Enemy droids!” he shouted as he readied his blaster rifle. “They spotted me!”

A moment later, there came a much louder blast from outside, and then a hunk of metal sailed up through the transport’s open hatch and bounced off the main cabin’s wall. The flying debris landed on the deck and rolled to a stop in front of Gunn’s feet.

Everyone recognized the debris. It was the head of Gunn’s navigation droid.

And then footsteps clanged against the landing platform. Nuru looked to the hatch and saw two pairs of lean, gunmetal gray droids coming in fast.

The four droids resembled Separatist battle droids but had truncated heads with white, glowing photoreceptors. The first pair carried black E-5 blaster rifles, and the second pair wielded shock-sticks.

Without hesitation, Nuru drew his lightsaber and ignited it.

Chapter Nine

What happened next happened very quickly.

Knuckles and Chatterbox stepped in front of Lalo Gunn to shield her from the droids that had just entered the grounded transport's cabin. Gunn gasped as Nuru's lightsaber swept through the air at the same moment that the two blaster-wielding droids took aim at him and opened fire.

Nuru angled his blade fast, batting the speeding energy bolts back at all the droids. The droids staggered at the impact as their own blaster fire struck their torsos, but none of the droids lost their footing.

Nuru dodged another fired bolt after rapidly calculating that its trajectory would slam into the cabin wall without striking Gunn or the troopers, and leaped forward to swing his lightsaber through the neck of the nearest droid.

Nuru's lightsaber swept through his first target and then chopped off the gun-arm of the second. He flicked his wrist and his lightsaber cleaved up through another droid's body and head, cutting it in half. The first two droids were still collapsing to the deck as the other pair raised the sharp, energized tips of their shock-sticks.

Nuru was about to attack the remaining droids when he suddenly felt a strong grip around his wrist. Breaker had grabbed

Ryder Windham

him, and Nuru reflexively switched off his lightsaber as Breaker said, "Down!"

Breaker threw himself to the deck, pulling Nuru with him as he used his own armored body to shield the boy. They'd landed between the shock-stick wielding droids and the two other troopers.

Knuckles and Chatterbox instinctively selected their own targets and opened fire, sending energy bolts across the cabin, over the prone forms of their allies and straight at the two droids.

They fired at the droids' weapon-arms before shifting their aim to shoot at the droids' necks. The droids' bodies jerked and sparked and shattered before they fell to the deck like marionettes whose strings had been cut.

A silence fell over the transport's interior. Still covering Nuru, Breaker said, "Check outside."

Knuckles and Chatterbox leaped over the remains of the ruined droids, taking their rifles with them as they ran down the landing platform. They left Gunn crouched low against the wall in the cabin. She had her hands clamped over her ears as if she were expecting more noise.

Breaker rolled off of Nuru, pushing himself up from the deck. He offered his hand to the boy. Nuru ignored the hand and rose to his feet without help. He said, "Why'd you shove me?"

"I was protecting you," Breaker said.

Nuru secured his lightsaber to his belt. "I could've handled all the droids."

"Maybe," Breaker said, "but I couldn't take that chance."

Gunn removed her hands from her ears and stood up. Facing Nuru, she said, "When you told me you were a Jedi, I thought you were joking."

Nuru shrugged.

"I'm just looking for a way off Kynachi," Gunn continued. "I didn't bargain for dealing with a Jedi or getting my ship shot up by droid commandos." She glanced at Teejay's head amid the

STAR WARS: Breakout Squad

clutter of droid parts scattered on the deck. “Didn’t bargain for losing my navigator, either.”

Nuru said, “Droid commandos?”

“That’s what these things are,” Gunn said, placing a kick at a piece of gunmetal gray scrap.

Footsteps sounded on the landing ramp, and then Knuckles and Chatterbox reentered the cabin. They weren’t alone. They had their arms wrapped around a humanoid male alien, whom they carried between them.

The alien had a long, green-blue face without a nose. At first glance, Nuru thought the alien was a Neimoidian, but quickly realized he was a similar-looking alien, a Duros, who was distinguished by larger eyes and a more prominent brow. The Duros wore a broad-brimmed hat, carried two bolstered blaster pistols, and had his eyes squeezed shut.

Knuckles said, “No other droids outside, but we found this guy lying on the ground.

The Duros lowered his head and said, “Take it easy! I’m blinded.”

Breaker looked to Gunn and said, “Have you ever seen him before?”

“Never,” she said. Lowering her voice, she added, “Judging from those quick-draw holsters he has strapped to his thighs, I’d say he’s some kind of hired gun.”

Knuckles and Chatterbox eased the Duros onto the cabin’s padded bench, then turned to Nuru. Knuckles said, “Chatterbox and I will stand guard outside and watch for more droids.”

Nuru nodded and the two troopers headed for the exit. They grabbed their smelly robes, pulled them over their armor, and stepped out of the transport.

Nuru moved beside Breaker and Gunn, who stood facing the Duros. The Duros tried opening his red eyes, then squeezed them shut again.

Breaker said, “Who are you, and what happened nut there?”

Ryder Windham

"I'm a bounty hunter," Cad Bane said. "I stopped at the diner for a meal." He paused to catch his breath. There was a droid outside ...a waiter."

"This droid?" Breaker said, picking up Teejay's head and holding it in front of the Duros's face.

Bane opened his eyes slightly and squinted at Teejay's head. "It's blurry, but, yeah, I think that him." He closed his eyes again and shook his head before he continued. "But then four droid commandos came from out of nowhere. I guess they were on patrol. They saw me and ... they wanted to arrest me. I couldn't let them do that. I tried to run away, but they started shooting at me. I ducked behind a table for cover. The waiter, he ran off, and then ... one of the commandos lobbed some kind of luma grenade. I didn't shut my eyes in time. Caught the full flash, but the blast missed me."

"Teejay wasn't so lucky," Gunn said. "You should be able to see again in a few minutes, bounty hunter. Meanwhile, tell us, what brought you to Kynachi?"

"A job," Bane said flatly.

"You'll have to do better than that, pal," Gunn said as she picked up one of the fallen droid commandos' blasters and pressed its barrel against the Duros's forehead. "No one has a job on Kynachi unless they're doing business with the Trade Federation. For all we're know, you're a Neimoidian spy.

Nuru said, "But he's not a Neimoidian. He's a Duros.

"Who said that?" Bane said, his eyelids fluttering. "Sounds like a kid."

"My name is Nuru."

"Well, you're right. Nuru. I am indeed a Duros."

Gunn pressed the blaster harder against the bounty hunter's forehead and said, "I don't care if you're King of the Hutts. I want to know how you got through the Federation blockade. And how come those droids wanted to arrest you."

Eyes still closed; Bane sighed. "I'm working for an enemy of the Federation. A very wealthy, powerful client I'd rather not

STAR WARS: Breakout Squad

name. My client provided pass codes to get my ship past the blockade, and also schematics for the prison at the KynachTech factory. I was hired to bust somebody out of the prison. I tried to keep a low profile, but the droids ... I don't know. Maybe they didn't like the way I look."

Nuru looked at Gunn and said, "The KynachTech factory has a prison?"

"Courtesy of the Trade Federation, or so I've heard," Gunn said, pulling her blaster away from the Duros's forehead but keeping it aimed at him. "The factory is where they built the frequency jammer, too. The whole place is heavily guarded by battle droids."

Bane's eyes opened slightly, and then opened wider as he looked at Breaker. "I couldn't see you before, but... You're a Republic trooper!"

Breaker nodded. "That's right. So are the pair who hauled you in here."

Returning his gaze to Nurū, Bane said, "Then that means you must be ... I'm sorry. I didn't realize I was talking to a Jedi. You could've used a mind trick to make me talk if you'd wanted."

Nuru shrugged. After Gunn had threatened the Duros with the blaster, he'd talked so readily that Nurū hadn't even considered trying a mind trick. Nurū said, "Who are you trying to get out of prison?"

"Out of respect to my client," Bane said, "I'd rather not say. But I assure you, the individual I'd hoped to liberate is no friend to the Federation or the Separatists." Bane paused, then said, "So, I guess you were hoping to break into the prison, too?"

Confused, Nurū said, "Why would you think that?"

Bane glanced nervously at the blaster in Gunn's hand, Nurū motioned for Gunn to lower the blaster. She did.

Bane sighed. "Well," he said, "about an hour ago, I was scoping out the prison, and I saw the droids escorting what appeared to be some new prisoners. Four Republic troopers.

Ryder Windham

They were carrying a body. Looked like a man with silver hair, and he wasn't wearing white armor. I figured he might be a Jedi."

Now it was Nuru whose eyes went wide. He was almost afraid to ask, but the words tumbled out of his mouth. "Could you tell if he was still alive?"

Bane shook his head sadly. "Sorry," he said. "Not from where I was standing."

Breaker shook his head. "If you only saw four troopers, that means one of them didn't make it." He wondered if Sharp had survived.

Nuru looked at Breaker and said, "That may be. But Master Ambase is alive. I'm certain!" He looked back at the Duros. "You said you have schematics for the prison."

"Yes," Bane said. "The schematics are on a datatape."

"You know how to get in?"

"I do," Bane said. "And I thought I could do it on my own, but after seeing the place, I doubt it."

Breaker said, "What's the problem?"

Bane gestured to Gunn and said, "Like the lady said, the prison is guarded by droids. There's a main entrance and another for deliveries, both protected by energy shields. The delivery entrance has fewer guards, but more than I expected. I need someone who's already inside to shut down the energy shield for the delivery entrance. I'd hoped to figure out a way to get a prisoner to shut down the shield, but I'm afraid the place is locked up so tight that there's no way to contact any prisoners."

Gunn snorted. "You make shutting down a prison's energy shield sound like it's easy. Even if you could contact a prisoner, you'd probably be asking them to go on a suicide mission."

Bane shrugged and said, "Then I guess this is one job that I'll just have to walk away from. My ships in a docking bay up the street. My client's pass codes should get me past the blockade again. Plenty of room on my ship. Anyone want to leave with me?"

"Wait!" Nuru said.

STAR WARS: Breakout Squad

His mind raced. He desperately wanted to find his Master, but if the bounty hunter had described the situation accurately, it seemed they had little chance of breaking into the prison and successfully liberating any captives without getting someone hurt or killed. Unable to think of a solution, he lowered his head sadly.

And he found himself looking at the droid parts that remained strewn across the deck.

"Maybe none of us or any prisoners are the solution," he said. "Maybe what we need is a droid." He turned to Breaker. "You have a knack for technology." He gestured to the scrap on the floor. "Think you could assemble a single droid from these parts, and reprogram its brain to follow our orders?"

Breaker looked at the parts. "Shouldn't be difficult," he said, "but I'm guessing the brains are slave-circuited. They may not be reprogrammable. However, ..." He was still holding the head of Gunn's navigation droid, and he turned it over in his hands. "The Genetech brain could work." He looked at Gunn. "With your permission, of course."

"You got it," Gunn said. Then she looked straight at the navigation droid's head and said, "Sorry, Teejay, but you knew I was never the sentimental type."

Breaker said, "I'll need tools."

"I'll get them," Gunn said. "But let's get one thing straight. I'm not in this for fun. I expect someone here to help me get off this planet."

Nuru said, "We'll do everything we can. I promise."

As Gunn went to get a tool kit for Breaker, Bane smiled at Nuru and said, "You're very clever. Using a reprogrammed droid to break into the prison ..." He shook his head. "I'm embarrassed that I didn't think of that idea myself."

In fact, ever since Bane had received his most recent instructions from Darth Sidious, he had gone to a great deal of trouble - summoning the four commando droids to fake the fight with him at Gunn's ship, and then pretending that he'd been

Ryder Windham

temporarily blinded by a grenade - so Nuru would come up with that exact idea.

Bane had known it would be a risk to inform Nuru and the others that he was a bounty hunter. However, he also knew that it was easier to deceive someone by telling most of the truth than by telling a total lie.

Chapter Ten

The new droid was constructed on a workbench that retracted from the cabin wall inside Lalo Gunn's transport. Even with Nuru's assistance, it took Breaker almost two hours to piece together a single droid commando from the gathered parts, and also to modify the inside of the assembly's metal cranium to make room for the Genetech navigation droid's brain.

When Breaker was finished putting all the pieces together, he made an adjustment to the back of the droid's head.

The droid's photoreceptors suddenly glowed white, and a small light on its chest went from black to red. Breaker stepped back from the workbench, turned to Nuru and said, "The Genetech brain's memory nodule was slightly damaged, but it appears to be compatible with the commando droid's programming, and it should obey our instructions."

"Will the droid still answer to the name Teejay?" asked Gunn.

"I don't know," Breaker said. But he should operate on his own power. "Let's test him out."

Just then, Knuckles, Chatterbox, Gunn, and the Duros bounty hunter walked up the landing ramp and entered the cabin. Both troopers were once again disguised in their robes. Nuru looked at them and said, "You saw the prison?"

Ryder Windham

Knuckles gestured to Bane and said, "It's just like he described it. The delivery entrance is shielded, but it has fewer guards. We checked out the bounty hunter's ship, too. It's in Docking Bay 21, and it's big enough to carry about twenty people. Is the droid ready?"

"We were just about to find out." Nuru returned his attention to the droid on the workbench and said, "Teejay? Can you hear me?"

There was a brief silence. The droid remained completely motionless as he spoke through the grilled vocabulator at the base of the head. "You are ... talking to me?"

"Yes," Nuru said. "Your name is Teejay."

"Is it?" The droid elevated his head, then pushed himself up to a seated position. "I did not know that."

Gunn said, "He doesn't even sound like Teejay anymore."

Nuru had noticed the change, too. Although he had not expected the refurbished droid to sound exactly like the waiter who had greeted him earlier, he was surprised that the droid's voice was so cold and mechanical, without any trace of emotion.

As the droid shifted his body, both Knuckles and Chatterbox raised their blaster rifles slightly, preparing to fire if necessary. Breaker saw his fellow troopers' action and said, "Stand down. He won't harm us."

Trusting Breaker, Knuckles and Chatterbox lowered their weapons.

"Teejay?" Gunn said. "Do you remember me?"

"Your voice is familiar," the droid said. He swung his legs off the workbench, placed his metal feet on the deck, and stood up. His head swung back and forth, looking at his arms as he flexed them. "Something is different," he said. "Was I always this way?"

"You were a navigation droid," Nuru said. "You're not anymore. Now, you're a fighter and a spy." He picked up a shock-stick that had been carried by one of the four droid commandos. "Do you understand?" He tossed the shock-stick to the droid.

STAR WARS: Breakout Squad

The droid caught the blade weapon with one hand, looked at it, and then gave it a rapid spin with his nimble fingers. Then he released the weapon so that it spun in midair, caught it in his other hand, and swung it in a series of incredibly fast chops. The final chop brought the blade's energized tip within a millimeter of the deck before it stopped short. The droid cocked his head to the side. "I can fight," he said. "I can spy."

Gunn said, "He's definitely not Teejay anymore."

Knuckles said, "Then he needs a new name! The way he wields that blade, how about Cleaver?"

"Sounds good to me," Breaker said.

Gunn said, "You guys' arc really into nicknames, aren't you?"

"All right, then," Nuru said. "He's Cleaver." Facing the droid, he continued, "Cleaver, my name is Nuru. I'm a Jedi." Nuru signaled the three troopers to stand beside each other. "These soldiers are Knuckles, Chatterbox, and Breaker. You will obey our commands."

"Yes, Commander Nuru," the droid said with a polite bow as he held the shock-stick aside. "I will obey."

Bane gave Gunn the datatape that contained the prison's schematics. The group, including the newly named droid, reviewed the schematics on three small monitors at the transport's navigation console. The schematics showed the precise location of the factory level that had been converted into a cellblock for prisoners. Bane proposed a plan, which was as bold as it was devious.

When Bane was done talking, Nuru said, "You don't think we'll be able to disable the frequency jammer, too?"

Bane shook his head. "There isn't time. Our objective is to free the prisoners we're seeking and leave on my ship."

Gunn said, "I'm not crazy about leaving my ship behind."

Bane said, "I don't know any alternative. The pass codes are only good to get my ship through the blockade."

The three troopers looked at each other. Knuckles said, "What do you think about the plan, Breaker?"

Ryder Windham

"It'll be a walk in the park."

Chatterbox nodded in agreement.

"I have a question," Cleaver said, prompting everyone to look at him. "Am I to remain in prison after you leave?"

"That's right," Bane said. "We need you to stay there to reactivate the energy shield after we're gone, to prevent other droids from following us."

"I understand," Cleaver said. There was a clicking sound at the back of his head, then he said, "While I am in the control room, what should I do if I am discovered?"

"Lock the door," Gunn said.

"And hope they don't have blasters," Bane added.

The droid's head clicked again, then he looked at Nuru and said, "I understand."

Nuru tucked his lightsaber up his sleeve. Breaker pulled on his hooded robe while Knuckles and Chatterbox adjusted theirs to conceal their blaster rifles as well as their helmets. Cad Bane pulled on a poncho that hid his bolstered pistols. Lalo Gunn tucked a compact blaster pistol into her right boot. As the group prepared to leave Gunn's ship, the droid's neck made another loud clicking noise.

"Just a moment," Breaker said. "I'd better oil Cleaver's neck and make sure it's properly aligned. Give me two minutes. I'll meet you outside."

Less than two minutes later. Cleaver's neck was no longer clicking. Breaker took a multitool from Gunn's kit, secured it to his belt, then pulled his hood up over his helmet and led the droid out of the transport to meet the others.

Nuru, Gunn, and Bane had no idea that Breaker, while oiling the droid's neck, had also let Cleaver in on a secret.

Except for the battle droid sentries that were stationed outside, the KynachTech complex at the southern edge of the spaceport still looked more like a large factory than a prison. Wide sheets of metal were neatly stacked in a yard beside the

STAR WARS: Breakout Squad

building, which was topped by high windows and industrial ventilation chimneys, and the complex was bordered by warehouses. The tallest structure was the frequency-jammer tower, which jutted up from the side of the factory and resembled a pair of immense, shiny needles.

Nuru, Lalo Gunn, and Cad Bane led the three baggily disguised troopers past the warehouses near the factory's delivery entrance. All of them had their hands raised. Cleaver walked behind the group, holding a blaster rifle in one hand and a shock-stick in the other. The refurbished commando droid had the blaster rifle aimed at the troopers' backs.

As the group drew closer to the factory, one of the three troopers made a discreet hand signal to the other two, then quietly stepped away and ducked into an alley between two warehouses.

The trooper's departure went unnoticed by Nurru, Gunn, and Cad Bane, but not by Cleaver, who knew what the troopers were up to. Cleaver and the two remaining troopers kept their gazes forward and never broke their stride.

Four battle droid sentries stood in front of the delivery entrance, a wide-open doorway that was sealed by an invisible energy shield. Nurru noticed two large, cylindrical tanks were mounted to the building's outer wall, to the right of the doorway.

As his group drew closer to the entrance, Nurru looked into the doorway to see a large chamber that contained a stack of storage containers and a stairway that traveled up alongside an elevated loading platform.

Four more battle droids were stationed on the platform, and two doors were visible at the top of the stairway. Remembering the bounty hunter's schematics, Nurru recalled that the door on the left was the control room.

Seeing all the battle droid Nurru began to reconsider the bounty hunter plan. He suddenly imagined any number of ways the plan might go wrong, but he knew that it was too late to turn

Ryder Windham

back. He forced himself to remain calm as they came to a stop before the four droids outside the shielded entrance.

Cleaver said, "I am escorting these prisoners to processing."

The battle droid commander said, "But prisoners are to be escorted through the main entrance."

"These prisoners are low-security," Cleaver said. "My orders were to deliver them here because of a communication malfunction at the main entrance."

The droid commander said, "No one told us about a communication malfunction."

"The malfunction prevented anyone from telling you," Cleaver said.

"That makes sense," the droid said. He turned to face the droids on the landing platform and said, "Drop the shield!"

There was a buzzing sound as the energy shield deactivated. Cleaver said, "Move along."

Nuru led the procession through the doorway and into the chamber. Cleaver followed the group across the doorway's threshold, leaving the four battle droid sentries outside. There was another buzzing sound as the energy shield reactivated.

As the group moved into the chamber, they came a loud clatter from the loading platform. Nuru, Gunn, Bane, and the two troopers looked up to see twelve additional battle droids appear on the platform. Nuru's hand darted for his lightsaber, but stopped short of grabbing it when he heard Gunn gasp as the doors at the top of the stairway opened to spill out more droids. All the droids trained their blaster rides at the new arrivals.

"Looks like the clankers got us," one clone trooper said. "No point in disguises now." Both troopers tilted their heads back slightly, letting their hoods fall back to reveal their white plastoid helmets.

On the platform, the battle droids shifted and stepped aside, allowing an alien figure to emerge and gaze down on the people below. The alien was a tall Skakoan, and he wore metal-rimmed goggles and a face-concealing breath mask. Except for the top of

STAR WARS: Breakout Squad

his green-skinned head, his entire body was encased within a metal-armored pressure suit.

“Greetings, Republic dogs,” the Skakoan said through his mask’s voice synthesizer. “I am Overseer Umbrag of the Techno Union. I have been expecting you.”

Expecting us? Nuru realized that someone in his party might be a traitor. He looked at Gunn, who appeared to be as surprised as he was. Then he looked at the Duros bounty hunter, whose expression remained as impassive as ever. It wasn’t until he glanced back behind him that he realized one of the three troopers was missing.

Before Nuru could even venture a guess as to which trooper had managed to avoid capture. Overseer Umbrag said, “Seize their weapons.”

Nuru bent his knees and sprang high into the air, leaping so fast that the droids didn’t even realize he’d jumped until he was already executing a midair somersault just below the ceiling. He was still tumbling as he drew his lightsaber from his belt. The battle droids’ elbow joints clacked as they quickly raised their rifles, but not in time to fire at the boy, whose incredible leap carried him over and behind Overseer Umbrag. As Nuru’s feet met the platform, he ignited his lightsaber so that its lethal blade was blazing within a hair of Umbrag’s armored neck.

“Make one wrong move,” Nuru said from behind Umbrag, “and you won’t need your pressure suit anymore.”

Chapter Eleven

Umbrag heard the lightsaber's energized hum and saw its blade out of the corner of one goggled eye. Behind the goggles, both of his eyes had gone wide with surprise.

The battle droids who were closest to Umbrag and Nuru on the elevated loading platform tumbled away from their master to redirect their weapons at the blue-skinned boy. Nuru looked up at the back of Umbrag's head and held his lightsaber steady as he said, "Tell the droids to hold their fire."

"H-hold!" Umbrag gasped. "Hold your fire!"

Nuru said, "You were expecting us? Who told you?"

Before Umbrag could answer, a massive explosion sounded from outside the building. At the same time, the entire wall that surrounded the delivery entrance's energized doorway buckled and cracked, spraying dust across the chamber. The four droid sentries who had remained posted at the entrance were vaporized.

The power of the blast jolted everyone in the room, including Umbrag, whose sudden move caused the side of his metal mask to come into contact with Nuru's lightsaber.

Umbrag flinched and shouted as he heard the hiss of melting metal. His gloved hands came up reflexively, and one hand struck

STAR WARS: Breakout Squad

the barrel of one battle droid's rifle. The startled droid fired the weapon into the ceiling.

The bounty hunter responded to the sound of blaster fire by quickly drawing both of his pistols and shooting at the metal heads of the nearest battle droids.

"No!" Nuru shouted. But it was too late. Shots had been fired, and Nuru heard the entire chamber erupt into chaos. He glanced past Umbrag's armored form to see the figures that stood on the floor below the loading platform.

Cleaver was using his rifle-wielding arm to mow down a trio of battle droids who'd been about to fire their own rifles into the backs of the two troopers, while, at the same time, he swung his shock-stick with the other hand to remove the heads of three more opponents. The two clone troopers had positioned themselves on either side of Gunn, shielding her as they faced away from each other and fired at the surrounding battle droids. Gunn had drawn her own blaster and was also shooting away.

Another explosion sounded from outside the building. Nuru's memory instantly flashed to the two cylindrical gas tanks that he'd noticed when his group had approached the entrance. He realized that someone - probably the absent clone trooper - had blown up both the tanks.

There was a bright flash as the entrance's energy shield crackled and died, causing Nuru to blink his red eyes. He was still positioned behind Umbrag on the loading platform when he adjusted his vision to look again to the floor below.

Cleaver was living up to his name by tearing into one battle droid after another. The troopers and Gunn had maneuvered themselves behind the stack of storage containers, where Gunn had picked up a fallen droid's blaster rifle and was using that as well as her own pistol to return fire.

Where's the bounty hunter? Nuru couldn't see the Duros anywhere. But then he spotted three battle droids moving toward the edge of the platform, where they would all have clear shots at his allies below.

Ryder Windham

Nuru shoved past Umbrag and leaped at the three droids. His lightsaber swept through two while he was still airborne, neatly severing their heads before he landed and drove his blade straight through the third droid's torso. Then he heard a ratcheting sound from behind, and saw that the droids that remained on the platform were readying their blasters as they repositioned themselves around Umbrag.

The droids opened fire at Nuru. The young Jedi's blade became a rapid blur as he batted at the fired bolts and slammed them back at his attackers. Two droids fell, and then Nuru deftly sent two bolts straight to either side of the armored brace that encased Umbrag's neck, prompting the panicked Skakoan to yell, "Cease fire! Cease fire!"

But the droids didn't hear the command. They were still firing at the boy as he charged them, dodging the energy bolts as he brought his lightsaber through two droids, and then another two. Umbrag began backing away from the fight, moving toward a door at the back of the platform.

Nuru saw Umbrag's movement, but was still engaged with the droids and unable to stop him. As he felled the last droid on the platform, Umbrag was gone.

Just as suddenly as the fight had started, there was a loud energized snapping sound from the floor below the platform, and then the entire chamber went silent. Nuru ran to the platform's edge, looked down and saw Cleaver leading Gunn and the two troopers past a heap of shattered battle droids.

One trooper glanced up at Nuru and said, "You had us worried. Commander Nuru."

"I had *you* worried?" Nuru said as he deactivated his lightsaber. "Imagine my surprise when I realized we'd lost a trooper before we even got here!"

Gunn looked around and said, "Yeah, where's number three? If Chatterbox took off on me, I'll-"

"Chatterbox never left your side," the trooper said as he gestured to the trooper next to Gunn.

STAR WARS: Breakout Squad

Gunn turned to face Chatterbox's T-visored helmet and said, "Never left my side, huh? I knew you liked me."

"Breaker took a walk," Knuckles said.

"He is blowing things up," Cleaver said. "He told me he would."

Ignoring the droid, Nuru said, "Knuckles, what's going on? And where did the bounty hunter go?"

"We can talk about this later," Knuckles said. "More droids are probably on their way. If we're going to find our allies and get them out of here, we need to move now."

"You're right," Nuru said. "Let's just hope that the bounty hunter's schematics for this place were accurate, or we may never find the cell block level. Come on, Cleaver!" He turned and ran up the stairs that led out of the chamber. The others followed. They were still running up the stairs when they heard another explosion from somewhere outside.

What's Breaker doing?! Nuru thought.

Breaker hid behind a high stack of sheet metal as a squad of battle droids ran past him, heading for an outbuilding that had smoke pouring out of its upper windows.

After using his first explosive grenade to blow up the gas tanks outside the factory's delivery entrance, he had run fast to plant his second grenade on the side of the outbuilding's ventilation chimney. He didn't know how many droids were guarding the complex, but from what he could see, he had drawn their attention away from one particular place.

The frequency-jamming tower.

Breaker saw a drone gravsled - an automated flatbed cargo-carrier that floated on a cushion of air - transporting blocks of white plastoid across a landing pad. The gravsled was moving toward the tower that was his destination.

Keeping his helmeted head down and his eyes peeled for droids, Breaker quickly shrugged out of his robe and left it on the ground. Then he darted away from his hiding spot and jumped

Ryder Windham

onto the side of the gravsled. His weight caused it to wobble slightly but it quickly righted itself and continued traveling forward through the air.

But a moment later, the gravsled slowed and came to a stop to allow five more battle droids to pass. Hearing the approaching droids, Breaker held his breath and remained perfectly still.

As the droids moved past the gravsled, one said, "Those explosions were loud, weren't they?"

A second droid said, "I heard they caused a communication malfunction."

A third droid said, "I heard the communications malfunction was a rumor started by sentries at the delivery entrance."

A fourth droid said, "If we were having a communications malfunction, we would have heard about it."

A fifth droid said, "Unless a communications malfunction prevented us from hearing about it."

"I heard the explosions just fine," said the first droid.

"Who asked you?!" the four other droids said in unison.

None of the droids noticed the white armored figure that blended in perfectly with the shipment of plastoid blocks. After the droids walked off, the gravsled started up again. When it carried Breaker within two meters of the frequency-jamming tower, he dropped off the gravsled and made a crouching run for the tower's base.

There was a vent at the bottom of the tower. Breaker ducked and slid through the vent. It didn't take him long to find a control box. He reached for the multitool that he'd brought from Gunn's transport, removed his handheld comlink, and went to work as fast as he could. Using the multitool, he was easily able to disable the frequency jammer and use his own comlink to access the HoloNet and transmit a coded signal directly to the Jedi Temple on Coruscant.

Several minutes after fleeing the disastrous fight at the KynachTech Industries delivery chamber, Overseer Umbrag was

STAR WARS: Breakout Squad

breathless as he arrived in the shielded office suite that overlooked a landing platform, on which rested his private starship, a bulky Metalorn yacht.

Had he paused to look out his office's window, he would have seen dark smoke rising from one of the complex's outbuildings.

Umbrag's office contained a computer console that was linked directly to the frequency-jamming tower. His thick-gloved fingers trembled as he went to the console to adjust the controls that would enable a secure transmission over the HoloNet. He consulted a small monitor on the console, and was surprised to see that the monitor indicated that the HoloNet frequency was already open.

Umbrag turned to activate the holocomm on his desk. Blue light fizzled in the air above the holoprojector, and then the light flickered and formed into the three-dimensional image of a gaunt, dignified-looking man with a well-groomed white beard and intense eyes. The hologram said, "Yes?"

"Count Dooku!" Umbrag wheezed. "The Jedi... who came to Kynachi..."

"Yes, what of him? You haven't allowed him to escape, have you?"

"No!" Umbrag said. "You said he would be the only one. Another is here!"

Far across space, Dooku's brow furrowed, and his hologram in Umbrag's office did the same. Dooku said, "My informers told me only one Jedi would travel to Kynachi."

"I was expecting a few more clones," Umbrag said. "Not another Jedi! He is in my factory now!"

Dooku's head turned to his right, as if he were looking at someone or something else, and he nodded once before returning his gaze to Umbrag. Dooku said, "Are you aware that another transmission has left Kynachi?"

"What? That's impossible!"

Dooku scowled. "I have it on very good authority that a coded signal has just summoned Republic forces to Kynachi

Ryder Windham

immediately. Evidently, your frequency jammer is no longer effective. I regret their assault ships will arrive before I can deliver reinforcements.”

Umbrag gaped behind his metal mask, then stammered, “What- What shall we do?”

“Is the captured Jedi still alive?”

“Yes. He remains unconscious.”

“Then leave him,” Dooku said. “Destroy the factory, and withdraw your entire fleet from Kynachi”

“Destroy? Withdraw?” Umbrag sputtered behind his metal mask. “I have ten years invested in this factory!”

“The factory is expendable,” Dooku said, “but we cannot afford to lose your fleet.”

“Why don’t I take the Jedi as a hostage?”

“Because the other Jedi will pursue you.”

“But... ten years!”

“Overseer Umbrag, if you want to stay alive for another ten minutes, I advise you to follow my command. Leave. Now. Dooku broke the connection, and his hologram vanished.

Umbrag rushed to his Metalorn yacht. Although he was pained by the idea of blowing up the KynachTech factory, he knew better than to disobey Count Dooku, and he had every intention of triggering the auto-destruct system as soon as he was airborne.

Dooku stood in his secret lair in an industrial sector on Coruscant. Turning away from the holoprojector on the triangular table before him, he looked to the hunched, shadowy form of his Master, the Sith Lord Darth Sidious.

Dooku said, “Ring-Sol Ambase’s apprentice appears to be living up to our expectations.”

“Yes,” Darth Sidious hissed. “Everything is proceeding as I have foreseen.

“Which trooper transmitted the signal from Kynachi?”

STAR WARS: Breakout Squad

“CT-8863. His squad calls him Breaker.” Then Darth Sidious leered, and he added, “They are *most* resourceful.”

Chapter Twelve

The six battle droids who were stationed in the antechamber outside the lift tube in the factory's convened cell block level did not expect a droid commando to step out of the lift. But because the droid commando appeared to be a standard Federation model, the battle droids did not regard him or the weapons that he carried as a threat.

One of the battle droids noticed scorch marks on the droid commando's upper arms and torso, and said, "Looks like you've seen some action."

"Not enough," Cleaver said. He drove his shock-stick through the first droid as he raised his blaster-wielding arm and squeezed off five bursts at the others with pinpoint accuracy, blowing their heads clean off. The battle droids collapsed to the floor. Cleaver turned to face the lift tube's open door and said, "All clear."

Nuru, Gunn, Knuckles, and Chatterbox had pressed their bodies against the walls inside the lift to conceal themselves from the battle droids, and now they all slipped out through the lift's door to join Cleaver in the antechamber. The fallen droids lay on the floor near a wall-mounted computer console. Beyond the antechamber extended two long corridors with sealed metal doors.

STAR WARS: Breakout Squad

Nuru looked at the computer console and said, "This probably controls the locks for the cell doors.

Knuckles said, "I'd bet that Breaker could probably hotwire it."

"But he's not here!"

Gunn snorted. "I'd bet that Breaker's not the only one handy with technology," she said as she stepped over a shattered droid to examine the console. A moment later, she was pressing buttons while watching numbers flash on an octagonal monitor.

Just then, Knuckles and Chatterbox heard a voice via their helmets' built-in comm units. "Breaker to Knuckles and Chatterbox. Do you copy?"

Knuckles raised a hand to the side of his helmet and said, "We copy." He turned to face Nuru and said, "It's Breaker."

Surprised, Nuru said, "I thought the comms were inoperative."

"Breaker disabled the frequency jammer," Knuckles said as he removed his handheld comm unit from his utility heft and gave it to Nuru,

"Breaker?" Nuru said into the comm. "Can you send a signal to Coruscant?"

"Already done, Commander," Breaker responded. "Is the bounty hunter still with you?"

"No. He pulled a vanishing act, but his schematics led us to the cell block. We're trying to release Master Ambase and the other--"

"Sir!" Breaker interrupted. "I'm in view of a landing pad outside the factory. A large ship is lifting off."

"What ship?"

"A Metalorn yacht."

Before Nuru could comment, a yellow light winked on the computer console in front of Gunn. "That was easy," she said. "Fifty cells, all occupied."

Nuru said, "Open them all."

Ryder Windham

Gunn pressed a button and a loud pneumatic hiss sounded down from both corridors as the doors opened. A moment later, several golden-haired prisoners peered cautiously out from their cells. Nuru was about to call his Master's name when a violent explosion shook the entire cell block.

The enormous blast wracked the upper levels of the KynachTech factory, and, a moment later, the explosion's shock wave struck Breaker. He had left the disabled tower and had been moving stealthily along an access ramp near the landing pad, watching the Metalorn yacht ascend rapidly into the sky, when the shock wave launched him off his feet.

Breaker's lower body slammed against a metal guardrail at the edge of the ramp. He heard an ugly snap and felt a sudden, terrific pain shoot up through his left leg as his weight carried him over the guardrail and onto the ground below. He landed hard, his armor biting into him as he struck the ground and came to rest at the bottom of a ferrocrete wall.

Everything hurt. Breaker shifted his neck to look up and saw bright yellow flames and dark gray smoke rising from the factory. He tried to push himself up and immediately wished he hadn't.

"Breaker!" Knuckle's voice cried out over Breaker's helmet comlink. "What happened?"

"Big explosion," Breaker said through clenched teeth. "Don't know ... what caused it. Factory's on fire." Breaker concentrated, pushing his pain out of his mind so he could focus on his memory of the bounty hunter's schematics. "Looks bad from out here. Don't leave by the lift tube. Take the emergency exit."

"We'll meet you outside."

Before Breaker could reply, there was another explosion directly overhead. Breaker's eyes were still open as the ferrocrete wall came crashing down on top of him.

Dust and small bits of mortar fell from the cell block ceiling as the next blast shook the building. Some of the prisoners

STAR WARS: Breakout Squad

ducked back into their cells while others leaped out into the corridors. Nuru had hoped to see his silver-haired Master, but there was no sign of Ring-Sol Ambase.

Knuckles positioned himself so he could see down both corridors, then said, "We're Republic Army troopers. If you're against the Federation, then you're with us!"

One of the prisoners said, "Republic Army?"

"That's right," Knuckles said. "Just call us the Breakout Squad,"

A dark-haired man lumped out from one of the cells. Although he was clad in a simple, gray tunic and pants, his swarthy features betrayed his identity as a clone trooper. The clone called out, "Knuckles?"

"Trueblood!" Knuckles said. The last time he'd seen Trueblood was when he'd glimpsed him inside the escape pod with four other clones and General Ambase. "I'd know that face anywhere!"

Trueblood shouted, "Come on, men. It's not a trap. It's Knuckles!"

Three more gray-clad clones poked their heads out of other cells. Knuckles recognized them as Close-Shave, No-Nines, and Sharp, who had been in the same escape pod as Trueblood. At the same time, mote golden-haired prisoners, all natives of Kynachi, came pouring out of the other cells and shuffled past the clones, making their way toward the antechamber.

Knuckles looked at Trueblood and said, "Dyre didn't make it?"

"Killed by droids after our escape pod crash-landed and - look out!"

Knuckles turned fast, saw Cleaver moving in the antechamber, then turned back to the four startled clones and said, "Relax, fellas. That's Cleaver. He's on our side."

"A friendly droid commando?" Sharp said. "That's a new one to us!"

Ryder Windham

Nuru pushed his way past the Kynachi natives until he arrived at Knuckles's side. He looked up at Trueblood and the other gray-clad clones and said, "I'm Nuru Kungurama, Master Ambase's apprentice. Is he with you?"

Trueblood shook his head. "Sorry, we don't know where General Ambase is. There was a gas leak in our escape pod. Knocked us all out before we landed. The General was still unconscious when the droids overwhelmed us and killed Dyre. They took your master along with our armor after they brought us here."

Nuru grimaced, then bolted away from the clones. "Master Ambase! Master Ambase!" He darted into one empty cell, and then into the next, searching for any sign of the missing Jedi.

Another explosion sounded overhead, sending more dust and larger chunks of mortar down from the ceiling, and prompting several prisoners to cry out in alarm. Desperate to find his Master, Nuru ran back into the corridor and was about to enter the next empty cell when Knuckles grabbed him by the arm.

"Commander Nuru," Knuckles said, as dust rained down on his helmet. "We can't stay here. The ceiling's starting to buckle."

Despite the ceiling's impending collapse, Nuru calmed himself and reached out with the Force, hoping to sense his Master. Only then did he know the truth with certainty. Ring-Sol Ambase was gone.

Nuru pulled away from Knuckles and they both quickly followed the rescued clones to the antechamber. As the four liberated clones arrived, they snatched up the blaster rifles from the floor beside the fallen droids.

"Move along, everyone!" Gunn shouted at the fleeing prisoners. "Don't worry about the droid commando, he's with us! Move, move, move!"

Despite Gunn's remark about Cleaver, the prisoners eyed the refurbished droid warily as they moved past it and followed Trueblood. Standing beside the droid, Chatterbox waved

STAR WARS: Breakout Squad

everyone toward the emergency exit, a doorway to a flight of stairs that led to an escape tunnel.

As Sharp hefted his newly acquired weapon, he saw the trooper who was directing the escapees to the exit. "Chatterbox!"

Chatterbox said, "Hi, Sharp."

Gunn's head turned as she heard Chatterbox's voice for the first time, and she said, "Quiet, you!" As she moved toward the exit, she saw Nuru and Knuckles were right behind her and said, "You're the last. Come on, move!"

Nuru and Knuckles ran for the exit. Knuckles saw Cleaver and said, "Don't just stand there! Run!"

A moment after Cleaver followed the others through the exit, the ceiling collapsed behind him. Dust blasted up the stairway, and Nuru found himself once again holding his breath with Knuckles by his side. They finally reached the escape tunnel, where the air cleared and Nuru was able to breathe again.

As they proceeded through the tunnel, Nuru said, "Knuckles, tell me what happened with the bounty hunter."

"I'm not sure," Knuckles said. "Breaker, Chatterbox, and I were suspicious of him from the start. But when he said there wasn't time to disable the frequency jammer, and also claimed that his pass codes were only good to get his ship through the blockade, we were certain he was up to something. Disabling the frequency jammer was the only way that we could summon help. And although it's generally illegal to transfer pass codes from one ship's transponder to another, it's not impossible."

"So, when did you work this out with the other troopers?"

"Remember what Breaker said when I asked him what he thought of the bounty hunter's plan?"

Nuru thought back. "Yes. He said it would be a 'walk in the park.' I thought that meant he thought the plan would be easy to pull off."

"It meant that Breaker saw an opportunity to break away from us so he could tackle the frequency jammer. And that's what he did. We couldn't tell you without alerting the bounty

Ryder Windham

hunter. I don't know where he went, but one thing's for sure. He didn't bust anyone out of prison. We did that."

The tunnel's exit was an open bulkhead beside one of the factory's outbuildings, not far from the landing pad where Umbrag had fled in his Metalorn yacht. Trueblood, Close-Shave, and No-Nines led the golden-haired natives and assorted allies out of the tunnel.

Although the outbuilding was a good distance away from the larger factory building, the factory was such an inferno that the heat was almost unbearable.

Nuru, Knuckles, and Cleaver stepped outside. They had expected to encounter more battle droids, but the only ones they saw were lying on the ground, totally deactivated.

"What happened to the droids?" Nuru said.

"Breaker said he saw a ship taking off," Knuckles said. "My guess is the whole Trade Federation blockade is gone, and they took their droid control ship with them. Without the control ship, these droids are just scrap metal."

Nuru glanced at Cleaver and said, "Then why are you still working?"

Cleaver pointed to his metal chest. "Breaker made me independent."

Nuru looked around. "Where is Breaker?"

"Hang on." Speaking into his helmet's comlink, Knuckles said, "Breaker? Breaker? Where are you?"

There was an awful moment of silence, then Breaker answered, "Knuckles ... I'm done for. Get out of here."

Knuckles looked to Nuru and said, "Breaker's down."

"Do you know where?"

Knuckles consulted a sensor in his helmet, then pointed to a flaming pile of ferrocrete rubble below a wall near the vacant landing pad. "There."

Nuru looked at Cleaver, and saw that the droid was following Knuckles's gaze. Nuru said, "Find him."

STAR WARS: Breakout Squad

Still carrying his shock-stick. Cleaver sprinted off, running toward the rubble. Despite Knuckles's training, he yielded to some basic instinct and bolted after the droid commando.

"Stop, Knuckles!" Nuru shouted as Gunn and Chatterbox moved beside him. "It's too hot!"

Knuckles kept running. Cleaver arrived at the site first, but it was Knuckles who spotted Breaker's hand sticking out from under a ferrocrete block.

"Cleaver!" Knuckles said, ignoring the incredible heat. "Over here."

The droid drove his shock-stick into the ferrocrete and the block shattered. Knuckles plunged his hands into the rubble and began digging, tossing chunks of ferrocrete aside.

They quickly exposed one of Breaker's armored arms. Cleaver stabbed at the ferrocrete again, and Knuckles kept digging. In less than a minute, they hauled Breaker out of the rubble.

With Knuckles right behind him, Cleaver scooped Breaker up in his metal arms and ran back to the bulkhead. They found that the Kynachi natives had already gone, but Nuru, Gunn, Chatterbox, and the plainclothes clones were waiting for them.

Cleaver carefully placed Breaker on the ground. Sharp said, "Breaker! I didn't expect to see you ever again either!"

As Nuru knelt and removed Breaker's helmet, Knuckles saw something move out of the edge of his own helmet's visor. He turned his gaze from his wounded ally and said, "Well, look who decided to rejoin us."

It was the Duros bounty hunter. He was walking away from one of the burning structures, moving straight toward Nuru and the others. Knuckles started to raise his blaster rifle at the approaching figure but Nuru reached out and grabbed the rifle's barrel, pushing it aside.

"Wait," Nuru said as he stood and moved away from Breaker's body.

"That bounty hunter's not to be trusted, Commander Nuru."

"I want to hear what he has to say."

Ryder Windham

Cad Bane came to a stop and said, "Sorry I ran out on you, but I wasn't getting paid to tangle with that many droids."

Nuru said, "Where'd you go? We know you never made it to the cell block."

"The prisoner I was hired to find was never in the cell block," Bane said. "I'm afraid he was gone before I got here."

"So," Nuru said, "does that mean you're leaving empty-handed?"

"Looks that way." Bane turned his head and spat at the ground. Then he looked back at Nuru and said, "But that doesn't mean you have to leave the same way."

The bounty hunter moved one hand slowly toward the back of his belt. The clone troopers braced themselves, preparing to fire at him if he made one false move. But when the Duros's hand moved out from behind his back, he was holding something very unexpected. It was a lightsaber.

Bane did not activate the weapon, but took a cautious step closer to Nuru and held it out to him. "I found this while I was searching for my own quarry," Bane said. "I suspect it may have belonged to the Jedi you sought."

Nuru Took the lightsaber. It was Ambase's weapon. He said, "Was there no other sign of him?"

"Only the lightsaber," Bane said. "For what it's worth, I hope you find him."

Nuru bowed his head slightly and said, "Thank you." As the bounty hunter started to turn and walk away, Nuru said, "What'd you say your name was?"

"I didn't," Bane said. He sauntered off, moving past the burning structures until he was gone,

Nuru secured his Master's lightsaber beside his own at his belt, then bent back down beside Breaker. "Breaker? Are you all right?"

"Leg's broken," Breaker said. "Three ribs, too. Other than that, I'm good to go."

Knuckles said, "Let's get him back to Gunn's ship."

STAR WARS: Breakout Squad

Cad Bane guided the gravsled that he'd taken from the factory back to his starship at Docking Bay 21. On the gravsled rested a two-meter-long, black plastoid box with an array of sensors on its side. Bane lowered his ship's landing ramp and walked alongside the gravsled as he guided it into the main cabin.

Bane raised the landing platform, then went to the ship's cockpit and initiated the launch sequence. A few minutes later, his ship was rising away from the Kynachi spaceport. When he reached space, he found that the Trade Federation blockade was gone.

Three Republic Navy *Venator*-class Star Destroyers suddenly dropped out of hyperspace to arrive in Kynachi's orbit. Bane's pass codes allowed him to avoid the Destroyers as easily as he had earlier bypassed the Federation blockade.

As the bounty hunter's ship sped away from Kynachi, Bane set the flight controls on autopilot and returned to the main cabin. Standing beside a console near the gravsled and the black plastoid box it carried, he activated a holocomm unit. Blue light flickered above the holoprojector, and formed into the image of the hooded Darth Sidious.

Darth Sidious said, "You have the body?"

"See for yourself," Bane said. He pressed a switch on the box's side, and the upper half of the box slid back silently to reveal a transparisteel coffin. Inside the coffin lay the body of Ring-Sol Ambase. His eyes were closed, and he wasn't moving.

Darth Sidious said, "The Jedi is alive?"

"That's what you paid me for." Bane pointed to a life system monitor on the coffin's side and said, "He may not look it, but all his vital signs are good, even though he's not generating enough energy for another Jedi to detect him."

"Then his Padawan does not suspect you of anything?"

Bane grinned. "When I gave him his Master's lightsaber, he thanked me."

"Excellent."

Ryder Windham

“Where do you want the Jedi delivered?”

“To the fifth moon in the Bogden system,” Darth Sidious said. “You will receive further instructions there.” The Sith Lord broke the connection, and his hologram flickered out.

Chapter Thirteen

“Master Ring-Sol Ambase’s disappearance, most distressing this is,” said the small, pointy-eared Jedi Master who appeared as a hologram above a console in Lalo Gunn’s transport. “Also disturbing are your actions, young one.”

Nuru stood before the console, facing the hologram of the Jedi Master Yoda. Behind Nuru, Breaker was sitting on the edge of Gunn’s retractable workbench with tape wrapped around his ribcage and a bacta-filled medpac covering his left thigh.

Knuckles, Chatterbox, Gunn, and Cleaver were also in the cabin, silently watching Nuru’s communication. Gunn’s transport was still on Kynachi, but now there were two Republic gunships resting on the ground beside it.

“I’m sorry, Master Yoda,” Nuru said. “I know it’s no excuse, but before my Master left Coruscant, I suddenly felt that he was in great danger. I believe it was the Force that guided my feelings. I only hoped that I might be able to help him.

“Informed the Jedi Council, you should have,” Yoda said. “Not left the Temple as you did. A time of war, this is. You were ...careless.”

A second hologram appeared beside Yoda, and Nuru was surprised to see that it was Supreme Chancellor Palpatine.

Ryder Windham

"Please forgive me for interrupting, Master Yoda," Palpatine's hologram said. "But I have just received a report that Separatist forces attacked Ring-Sol Ambase's ship at Kynachi."

Yoda nodded. "Still missing, Master Ambase is."

"I offer you all my resources to help find him Palpatine," said. "I was also informed that members of Ambase's unit, the Breakout Squad, liberated Kynachi after a ten-year occupation by the Trade Federation."

Yoda nodded again. "Accomplish this, Breakout Squad did."

"An entire planet held captive for a decade," Palpatine said with a shudder. "Who is the commanding officer of the Breakout Squad?"

"Hrm," Yoda said. He gave a sidelong glance at Palpatine, then gestured to the blue-skinned boy. "Chancellor Palpatine ... to you I introduce Master Ambase's apprentice, Nuru Kungurama."

Nuru felt his throat go dry. He was not accustomed to the emotion of fear, but as Palpatine's hologram turned to face him, he was afraid that his time with the Jedi Order was about to come to an end.

Palpatine's eyebrows lifted. "You are a Chiss!"

Nuru was taken aback, but he replied, "Yes, Chancellor."

"What an amazing coincidence. An hour ago, an ambassador of the Chiss Ascendancy contacted my office, requesting to meet with a representative of the Jedi Order at a Chiss space station as soon as possible."

Palpatine looked at Yoda and said, "The Republic cannot ignore this opportunity for diplomatic relations with the Chiss. Because the Separatists may have spies in Chiss space, I propose a classified mission. Master Yoda, with your permission, might Nuru Kungurama be available to meet with this ambassador?"

Nuru had thought that the Chancellor was going to reprimand him, not propose sending him on a mission. He could hardly believe his ears. He had been an infant when he first arrived at

STAR WARS: Breakout Squad

the Jedi Temple, and had no memory of his homeworld. In fact, few people in the Republic knew anything about the Chiss.

The Chiss lived in the Unknown Regions, far beyond the Outer Rim, and had no official affiliation with the Republic. Even the vast Jedi Archives had little data about the blue-skinned, red-eyed humanoids. Although Nuru had been raised to serve the Jedi Order, he could not help being curious about his place of origin.

Nuru swallowed hard. He had never imagined that he might one day travel to Chiss space.

"Hrm," Yoda said again. "About the Chiss, little do we know. For a secret mission, a more experienced Jedi, the Council should send."

"But who else is available?" Palpatine said. "It would be most unfortunate if we failed to take advantage of this opportunity. I've no doubt that the Chiss ambassador would be very pleased to meet with a Chiss Jedi, even one so young. Perhaps an escort could be arranged?"

"Accompany Nuru, Breakout Squad could," Yoda mused aloud. "But to other worlds, our ships must go."

Behind Nuru, Gunn cleared her throat. Nuru glanced at her and she aimed a thumb at herself. She said, "You get the coordinates, I'll get you there."

Returning his gaze to Yoda's hologram, Nuru said, "A freelance pilot has volunteered to deliver me and Breakout Squad to Csilla."

"Well done, Nuru Kungurama," Palpatine said. "I have every faith that your mission will be a success. The coordinates for Csilla will be transmitted to your ship immediately."

Yoda nodded to Nuru and said solemnly, "May the Force be with you."

Nuru bowed, and then the two holograms vanished.

"All right, then," Gunn said. "Gunn's Diner is officially closed. It's time for the *Hasty Harpy* to leave this dull rock."

Ryder Windham

She glanced at Cleaver, then looked at Knuckles and said, "Does the droid have to come with us?"

"Cleaver helped save Breaker! Far as I'm concerned, he's part of Breakout Squad, too."

As Breaker carefully pulled on his black body glove, he said, "I'll second that. Cleaver's a keeper."

Cleaver said, "Thank you. Master Breaker."

Gunn shook her head. "You're all crazy." She was about to raise the landing platform when a fully armored clone trooper came running up the ramp and into the cabin.

"Permission to board?" said the trooper.

"Granted," Gunn said. "Whoever you are."

Chatterbox said, "He's Sharp. Can't you tell?"

Gunn glared at Chatterbox and said, "You're starting to talk too much."

Sharp turned his helmeted head to be the young Jedi and said, "I just received orders to join your unit. Commander Nuru."

"Good to have you with us, Sharp."

"I've got the coordinates for our destination," Gunn said as she raised the landing ramp. "Everyone find a seat and buckle in."

Nuru belted himself into a seat beside Breaker. "Feeling any better?" the young Jedi asked.

"Much," Breaker replied. "I'm just sorry we lost General Ambase."

Nuru bit his lower lip, then said, "He's still alive, Breaker. I know he is. I just wish I knew where to find him,

Breaker gestured to the other troopers and said, "The boys and I will do everything we can to help you."

"Thanks, Breaker," Nuru said. "I'm fortunate to have all of you watching my back."

"That's what we're here for, Commander." Then Breaker lowered his voice and added, "But let's not forget that we still don't know how the Separatists knew we'd be arriving at

STAR WARS: Breakout Squad

Kynachi, or who sabotaged our escape pods. We may still be in danger, and I urge you to be watchful, too.”

“You can count on it,” Nuru said.

The *Hasty Harpy’s* thrusters ignited and the ship lifted off. Minutes later, the ship leaped into hyperspace, heading for the Unknown Regions.

Star Wars: Clone Wars
Secret Missions

Book Two
Curse of the Black Hole Pirates

Chapter One

Cad Bane was watching a holovid and cleaning his teeth with a small, durasteel ice pick when a warning light flashed on the console in his starship's cockpit. His ship's computer announced. "Approaching Bogden system. Exiting hyperspace in three minutes."

Still picking at his teeth, Bane switched off the holovid. He had been watching *The Bounty Hunters' Guild's Greatest Hits: Volume VII*, a collected edition of holorecorded assassinations. Even though the holovid was a pirated version, it included the exclusive bonus feature of techniques for killing amphibious targets. Bane had hoped he might learn some new tricks, but he was more than halfway through the holovid, and all he'd gotten out of it was a few laughs. The two Trandoshans were especially entertaining. Cradosk was the Bounty Hunters' Guild's leader and Bossk was his son. They never agreed, and they fought constantly. Bane thought they were a riot.

Outside the cockpit, the faster-than-light dimension known as hyperspace appeared as a radiant cascade that flowed over and past Bane's ship. He swiveled his seat, turning away from the deactivated holoprojector so he could run a quick check on the propulsion and navigation systems.

Ryder Windham

At first, all systems looked fine, but then he noted a negligible fluctuation in the null quantum field generator. As good as he was at creating chaos, Bane's real skill was his ability to gather and organize data that allowed him to control circumstances. He liked everything to operate his way.

Bane's ship was named the *Sleight of Hand*. Although it appeared to be a battered freighter, it was actually a heavily modified Telgorn dropship. Bane had done most of the work himself. The hull was military grade armor, and the upgraded hyperdrive could deliver him across the galaxy in a fraction of the time required by most ships. Weaponry included a top-mounted laser turret for ship-to-ship combat and pulverizing obstructive asteroids, a pair of heavy laser cannons to inflict even more lethal damage, and an ion cannon that Bane had used more than a few times to disable merchant cargo ships. A sophisticated sensor jammer rendered the *Sleight of Hand* invisible to most scanners.

Bane placed the ice pick lengthwise between his teeth, freeing his hands to push buttons on the engineering console until he corrected the fluctuation. Satisfied that the null quantum field generator now performed at a better than optimum level, he removed the ice pick from his teeth and gave the sharp tool a playful spin between his nimble, blue fingers.

He got up out of his seat and moved behind the cockpit to inspect his cargo, taking the ice pick with him. He stopped beside a two-meter-long, black plastoid box that rested on a hovering gravsled, which he'd magnetically anchored to the wall. A switch was on the box's side. Bane pressed the switch and the box's upper lid slid back, revealing a transparisteel coffin. Through the transparisteel, Bane could clearly see the unconscious, motionless form of Master Ring-Sol Ambase.

The coffin was actually an exotic stasis pod. A life system monitor was embedded into its side, and a thin layer of ice had formed over it. With surgical precision, Bane made a quick jab with the ice pick, shattering the ice without damaging the screen.

STAR WARS: Curse of the Black Hole Pirates

Bane leaned close to the monitor so he could read the Jedi's vital signs on a data display.

Ambase's condition had not changed. He was close to death, just as he had been ever since Bane had sealed his body in the coffin on the planet Kynachi. Whether Ambase lived or died depended entirely on how one was inclined to adjust the coffin's controls. Bane would have gladly killed the Jedi on the spot, but he hadn't been contracted to end Ambase's life, only to transport him from Kynachi to the fifth moon in the Bogden system.

Bane sealed the plastoid box, then tucked the ice pick into his gun belt as he moved back to the cockpit. Just as he returned to his seat, the hyperdrive engine began to wind down. He squinted his bulbous red eyes, and watched the bright cascade of hyperspace wash away and vanish through the cockpit window.

The *Sleight of Hand* dropped out of hyperspace without the slightest shudder. From the cockpit, Bane viewed a large planet that rested against a field of stars. He did not have to consult any data readouts to identify the planet Bogden, an unstable world with numerous moons, but he checked the navigational display anyway to confirm it was working properly. He did this out of habit, part of his ongoing routine to ensure that he would never, ever be a victim of anyone or anything, including faulty technology.

He turned his attention to a sensor scope, and focused the long-range sensors on Bogden's fifth moon, Bogg 5. The scope displayed a stream of data, including multiple layers of transmissions. Bane quickly learned that five ships were traveling to the moon and three were leaving. None of the ships were moving at excessive speed, listed as "stolen," or betrayed any awareness of the *Sleight of Hand*'s arrival in the Bogden system.

Filtering the transmissions, Bane intercepted a unique one, a signal that came from a small, artificial satellite in Bogg 5's orbit. The signal appeared as a flashing green dot on his scope, and a tiny readout indicated that the signal was broadcast on a secure

Ryder Windham

frequency. The satellite was spherical, barely half a meter in diameter.

Bane knew the signal was for him, and him alone. He turned his subspace transceiver to the signal, and tapped in a preset pass code. Had he entered the wrong code, the satellite would have exploded. Because he entered the correct code, he immediately received a set of coordinates for his next destination. The coordinates were for an unpopulated area on Bogg 5, a wide stretch of land eighty kilometers north of Mong'tar City.

Bane made a series of adjustments to his sensor controls, bounced a transmission off a triangulation of satellites over Bogg 5's far side, and zeroed in on the just-received coordinates. His sensors revealed a single starship had already landed there, and was waiting for him. The starship was a *Punworecca* 116-class interstellar sloop, a solar sailer.

Bane widened his scan beyond the edges of the Bogden system. More ships, more transmissions, many asteroids, and various radiation trails popped and fluttered across his scopes. The sensors did not reveal any unusual traffic or gravitational anomalies, but Bane did not let that stop him from being extra cautious. As far as he was concerned, anyone who put all his trust in sensors was not just a fool, but a fool who got what he deserved.

He plotted his own roundabout course to Bogg 5's surface. He believed there was always a chance that someone was after him. For this reason, he had developed another special skill, which was staying ahead of everyone else. Until he was absolutely certain that he was not being monitored or followed, he wouldn't go anywhere near the solar sailer that awaited him at the designated coordinates.

Nearly two hours later, Bane circled the landing area, a broad expanse of barren black rock, and then landed the *Sleight of Hand* ten meters from the solar sailer. Exiting his ship, he stepped out onto the hard ground, looked to the solar sailer, and saw a lone, hooded figure approaching. As the figure neared, Bane saw it was

STAR WARS: Curse of the Black Hole Pirates

a humanoid female, her face partially lost in the shadow of her cloak. She had chalk white skin and eyes so pale that had she not been walking, Bane might have assumed she was dead.

"You're late," said Asajj Ventress.

"I had to be sure I wasn't followed," Bane said, "and that you didn't bring any friends."

"Friends?" Ventress said with a sneer.

Bane grinned. "I brought something for you. Do you want it or not?"

Asajj Ventress nodded and Bane led her into the Sleight of Hand. He showed her the black plastoid box, and opened it to reveal the transparisteel coffin that contained Ring-Sol Ambase's motionless body. He pointed to the fresh layer of ice over the life system monitor and said, "The ice buildup is normal for this unit. Means everything's working right."

"It means your stasis pod is an antique," Ventress said disdainfully.

Ignoring her comment, Bane continued, "To view the monitor and access the controls, you just break off the ice. Like this." He removed the ice pick from his gun belt and jabbed it expertly into the ice. The ice cracked and fell free.

Ventress examined the controls, then leaned over the coffin and studied Jedi Master Ring-Sol Ambase's face. Not a trace of air escaped his nostrils. He was completely inert.

Cad Bane said, "I was told I'd be getting more instructions."

Rising away from the coffin, Ventress turned to face Bane. "You're going to Bilbringii. But first, move the pod to my ship," she said. "I'll take the ice pick, too,"

"Get your own ice pick," Bane said as he returned the tool to his belt. "This one's mine."

After the stasis pod was transferred to the solar sailer, Ventress watched the bounty hunter's ship rise away from Bogg 5's surface. When the ship had vanished into the sky, she took a

Ryder Windham

seat beside the droid pilot in the solar sailer's bubble cockpit and instructed the droid to lift off.

Ventress went to the main hold to inspect her cargo. The stasis pod that contained Ambase rested beside a second stasis pod that was contemporary in design. On top of the second pod was a Republic Army-issued white helmet with a T-visor, which until recently had been worn by the pod's unconscious occupant. Ventress confirmed both pods were operating efficiently before returning to the cockpit.

The solar sailer flew directly to another Bogden moon, the ancient tombworld named Kohlma. Shortly after the sleek vessel began its descent through Kohlma's atmosphere, it passed through gray clouds and angled toward a high mountain. The mountain was topped by a dark castle with a central dome, surrounded by spined spires that appeared to be growing up from their rocky perch. Rain pelted the solar sailer as it landed on a pad that jutted out from the base of the castle's dome.

The solar sailer's landing ramp extended and Ventress walked down it. She pulled back her cowl and turned her ghastly face up to the sky, squeezing her eyes shut as the rain spattered against her head.

"You're late," said a deep voice from the castle's nearby entrance.

Ventress opened her eyes as she turned to face the tall, well-groomed, immaculately attired man who stood in the vaulted doorway. He was Count Dooku, the former Jedi Master who was now the leader of the Separatist Alliance.

"Blame the bounty hunter," Ventress said. "He was late first."

Dooku lifted one eyebrow. "I trust he remains unaware of your own mission to Kynachi?"

Ventress nodded. "I obtained a ... companion for Ambase. As you wished."

Dooku stepped away from the doorway, his dark cape flowing behind him. A disc-shaped repulsorlift device hovered in the air above his head. The device moved along with him, projecting a

STAR WARS: Curse of the Black Hole Pirates

thin energy shield around his body to deflect the rain and keep him dry as he approached Ventress. He gestured to the nearby light freighter and said, "Prepare that ship for a crash landing."

"A crash landing? But why?"

"Do as I say," Dooku commanded.

Ventress stared hard at her Master for a moment, then slunk away from him, heading for the light freighter.

Dooku left his rain-repelling device hovering above the landing ramp as he entered the solar sailer. Inside the main hold, he found the two stasis pods. Ignoring the newer pod and the white helmet that rested on it, he stepped beside the black plastoid box and slid back its lid. He gazed at the unconscious Jedi Master who lay in the transparisteel coffin.

Brushing his fingers across the coffin's freezing surface, Dooku smiled and said, "It's been a long time, old friend."

Chapter Two

Nuru Kungurama had a lot on his mind.

By an incredible series of circumstances, the Padawan was on a smuggler's freighter, traveling across the galaxy with a squad of four Republic clone troopers and a reprogrammed droid commando. They were on a secret mission, heading, for a space station in orbit of Nuru's distant homeworld, the planet Csilla, in Chiss space. This was especially incredible because Nuru was only a Jedi apprentice, and his assignment had come from Supreme Chancellor Palpatine himself.

Events are moving too fast.

Chiss space was in the Unknown Regions, far beyond the galaxy's Outer Rim. Even though Nuru and his allies were traveling at faster-than-light speed through hyperspace, their destination was so remote that the journey required several layovers and detours through real space, and nearly ten days. If Nuru had ever been to Chiss space before, he had no memory of it.

Except for my own reflection, I've never even seen another Chiss.

Since infancy, he had been raised at the Jedi Temple on Coruscant. Although Coruscant was home to countless alien immigrants, some of whom had blue skin and red eyes, Chiss had been among the planet's greatest minorities. As for Jedi Archives,

STAR WARS: Curse of the Black Hole Pirates

it had more information about the rare energy spiders of Kessel than it had for all of Chiss space.

I've never been so far from the Temple.

Just a few days earlier, on Coruscant, Jedi Master Ring-Sol Ambase had been preparing to leave on a mission when Nuru had a premonition that Ambase would not return. Nuru's previous Master, Lanchu Skaa, had died at the Battle of Geonosis, the historic conflict that launched the civil war between the Galactic Republic and the Separatist Alliance. Nuru still felt the immense loss of Master Skaa, and it pained him that Skaa had left him on Coruscant without saying good-bye. He knew it was not Skaa's fault. Nuru believed Skaa would have said good-bye if he had had the opportunity, as well as the foresight that he would never see his apprentice again.

Will I ever return to Coruscant?

Determined not to lose his second Master, Nuru had stealthily boarded the ship that would transport Ambase and three squads of clone troopers to the planet Kynachi. He had only wanted to help.

The mission was a disaster. The Techno Union's Separatist forces, led by the Skakoan Overseer Umbrag, ambushed the Republic ship in orbit of Kynachi. The ship's escape pods had been sabotaged. Several clone troopers died. And Ambase vanished.

Did one of the troopers sabotage the escape pods? Or was it someone else?

Fortunately, Nuru and a group of clone troopers survived. They found new allies, including the pilot Lalo Gunn, captain of the *Hasty Harpy*, and the droid commando that they refurbished and named Cleaver. Working together, they rescued captive clone troopers from a Kynachi prison and liberated Kynachi from the Techno Union. They became the Breakout Squad.

I was never trained to command a squad of troopers.

Despite the victory over the Techno Union, Nuru had expected to be expelled from the Jedi Order because he had left Coruscant without permission. Instead, Supreme Chancellor

Ryder Windham

Palpatine convinced Master Yoda to allow the troopers of the Breakout Squad to escort Nuru to Csilla for a diplomatic assignment in Chiss space.

The Chancellor himself had provided the instructions for Nuru, along with navigational coordinates for the series of hyperspace jumps that were required to reach the Chiss homeworld. The Chancellor had also transmitted a small amount of data about Chiss culture, including a concise interactive guide to the Chiss language, Cheunh, and an allegedly easier trade language, Minnisiat. Now could barely comprehend either language.

We should have brought a protocol droid.

Nuru took some consolation in that the Chancellor's instructions were extremely brief. He was to meet a Chiss named Sev'eere'nuruodo at a space station, and find out if the Chiss had a specific interest in opening diplomatic relations with the Galactic Republic.

Could it be a trap?

Nuru couldn't imagine that the Chancellor would knowingly send him into a dangerous situation. But as he considered the possibility, he realized he'd moved his hand to brush his fingers against the two lightsabers that were clipped to his belt. He had built one of the lightsabers himself, and received the second from a mysterious Duros bounty hunter, who claimed he had found it on Kynachi. The second lightsaber had been Master Ambase's weapon.

My Master is alive. I know he is!

The last time Nuru had seen his silver-haired Master was on a small viewscreen, a moment before Ambase's escape pod jettisoned from the doomed freighter to Kynachi. Nuru wondered if Ambase had been abducted by Overseer Umbrag, who'd fled Kynachi in his Metalorn yacht before the arrival of Republic reinforcements.

Even though Nuru was not by himself as he traveled through hyperspace, he felt terribly alone.

STAR WARS: Curse of the Black Hole Pirates

I have to clear my mind.

He took a deep breath and began to meditate. He was still meditating almost an hour later, when he became aware of loud noises behind him. He knew who was responsible.

The Breakout Squad.

Lalo Gunn was seated in the cockpit of her freighter, the *Hasty Harpy*, when she heard a loud crash from behind in the main cabin. The Harpy was hurtling through hyperspace, and Gunn was afraid that the noise was a malfunction in the hyperdrive engine. A moment later, she heard a second crash, louder than the first. She glanced at a diagnostic display, searching for any sign of technical failure or damage.

Then came two more crashes in quick succession, followed by a rapid hammering noise.

Gunn grabbed a hydrospanner that dangled from a hook on the side of her seat as she scrambled out of the cockpit. Ducking through a short passage tube, she held the hydrospanner out like a weapon as she moved fast into the main cabin, but what she found there made her come to an abrupt stop.

One fully-armored clone trooper was engaged in a fight with a droid commando. Both opponents were using long durasteel rods to strike each other, producing loud clashing noises.

Two more troopers were prone on the deck, side by side, doing incredibly fast push-ups. As they bent their elbows and lowered their armored torsos, their Chins touched the cabin's metal deck.

A fourth trooper was partially stretched out upon an acceleration couch with his fingers interlocked behind his head. Wearing a black body glove, he had both legs braced under a neighboring worktable, which gave him traction while he performed vigorous sit-ups.

Then Gunn noticed the young, blue-skinned Jedi. He was easy to miss because he was the only one in the room who wasn't moving a muscle, and his dark tunic helped him blend in with the

Ryder Windham

cabin's drab interior. The boy stood by himself, head slightly lowered, hands clasped behind his back as he faced the cabin's far corner, apparently oblivious to the troopers. Gunn shouted, "What in blazes is going on back here?!"

All four troopers and the droid commando froze, then turned their necks to look at Gunn. For a moment, the only sound in the cabin was the steady hum of the hyperdrive engine. The young Jedi did not flinch and kept his back to everyone.

Gunn shifted her angered gaze at the trooper who'd been doing sit-ups. The trooper held Gunn's gaze and replied, "Sorry, Captain Gunn. We're just exercising."

Still holding the hydrosponder, Gunn made a sweeping gesture with her arm and added, "Does my main cabin look like a gymnasium?!"

"I'm sorry, too, Captain," said the trooper who'd been sparring with the droid commando. He pulled off his helmet, revealing swarthy features that were identical to the other troopers. Gesturing to the droid commando beside him, he continued, "Cleaver and I didn't mean to be so loud. Right, Cleaver?"

The droid named Cleaver nodded. "That is correct," Cleaver said through the gridded voculator at the base of his head. "Our only intention was to strike each other with blunt instruments." Although he appeared to be a standard-model Separatist droid commando, Cleaver was actually a refurbished unit, built from scavenged parts, including logic and behavioral circuits salvaged from the brain of Gunn's ruined navigation droid, Teejay.

The two other troopers got up from the deck where they'd been doing push-ups. "Please accept our apologies, Captain. If the boys and I don't keep up our physical training, we can get a bit restless."

"Oh, knock it off with the apologies already," Gunn said. "If it weren't for you guys, I'd still be stuck on Kynachi. But when I agreed to haul you off that rock, I didn't know I was signing on for such a long haul! We're going to be stuck in this crate for

STAR WARS: Curse of the Black Hole Pirates

over a week, but time will pass a lot faster if you learn to relax a little.” Then she looked at the one clone who hadn't spoken and she added, “As for you, Chatterbox, I'm just disappointed. You could've been sitting in the cockpit with me, enjoying the view of hyperspace, but instead, you're back here doing push-ups with your pals. Honestly!”

Chatterbox was baffled by Gunn's remark. He glanced at his three allies and saw they all wore similarly confused expressions.

Before any of the troopers could respond, Gunn continued, “Why is the Jedi facing the corner? Are you guys punishing him or something?”

Without turning to face Gunn or the others, Nuru replied, “I'm meditating.”

Gunn laughed. “Meditating, huh? Kid, if you could tune out the racket these guys were making, you must be very good at it.”

Breaker, the trooper who'd been sparring with Cleaver, said, “He's been standing there like that for over an hour.”

Looking away from Nuru, Gunn returned her attention to the troopers. “We'll be dropping out of hyperspace in about fifteen minutes,” she said. “It'll be just a short layover in the Fakir sector, but everyone should be belted into their seats when we exit.” Then she looked directly at Chatterbox and added, “The hyperspace routes that the Chancellor provided for the next two jumps are kind of tricky. In case you didn't notice, my ship is minus one navigator droid, so I'll need another set of eyes to monitor the navi-computer.”

The trooper who'd been doing sit-ups said, “I'd be happy to help, too, Captain. My eyes are good. Our former commander named me Sharp because he thought I had sharp eyesight.”

Keeping her gaze on Chatterbox, Gunn replied, “That's a nice story, Sharp, but I ain't talkin' to you.” Then she winked at Chatterbox and added, “See you in the cockpit.” She turned and stepped out of the cabin, heading back through the passage tube.

Chatterbox once again surveyed the expressions of the other clones. Sharp said, “Did I miss something earlier?”

Ryder Windham

"Yeah, you did," said Knuckles, the trooper who had been competing with Chatterbox to see who could do the most push-ups. "On Kynachi, before we rescued you, when Commander Nuru introduced Chatterbox to Gunn, Gunn mentioned that she liked men who keep their mouths shut."

Sharp said, "Really?" He looked straight at the silent trooper and said, "Chatterbox, are you deliberately keeping your mouth shut so Gunn will like you?"

Chatterbox shook his head.

"Well," Sharp said, "clearly, it's not Chatterbox's fault."

"Yeah, clearly," said Knuckles. "I thought Gunn was just joking about how much she liked Chatterbox, but I sort of get the impression she means it."

Breaker sighed. "They didn't teach us how to deal with situations like *this* back on Kamino."

Sharp stroked his chin thoughtfully, then said, "I think I know why Gunn *really* likes Chatterbox."

Breaker, Knuckles, and Chatterbox all turned to face Sharp. Speaking at the same time, Breaker and Knuckles said, "Why?"

"Isn't it obvious?" Sharp said. "It's because he's so much better-looking than the rest of us."

The clones looked at one another, and then Breaker, Knuckles, and Sharp burst out laughing. Chatterbox just rolled his eyes. The three troopers were still laughing when Cleaver said unexpectedly, "What is *meditating*?"

The troopers looked at Cleaver, who had turned his white photoreceptors to gaze at Nuru's back. Before any of the troopers could offer an answer to Cleaver, Nuru replied, "To meditate is to relax the mind as well as the body. To relax my mind, I think of nothing."

Cleaver said, "This helps you fight your enemies?"

"Yes," Nuru said. "And also helps my allies."

Cleaver shook his head. "I do not understand," he said. "When you look away from all others, and you are not holding a weapon, are you not more vulnerable to an attack?"

STAR WARS: Curse of the Black Hole Pirates

“Commander Nuru has special abilities, Cleaver,” Breaker interjected. “He’s a Jedi. He draws his power from some mystical energy called the Force.”

“The Force?” Cleaver said. He shook his head again. “I’ve never heard of that before. I have so much to learn.”

Breaker said, “Begging your pardon, Commander Nuru, but I wonder if Cleaver has a point. That is, about you being vulnerable while meditating. For example, how could you stop an assassin from shooting you in the back?”

Nuru answered calmly, “If you were an assassin, how fast could you fire your blaster?”

Cleaver and the other troopers looked at Breaker, waiting for his response. Breaker kept his own eyes fixed on the back of Nuru’s head as he said, “Begging your pardon again, Commander Nuru, but ... well, even with the Force, I don’t see how you’d stand a chance.”

Nuru said, “I suppose there’s only one way to find out. I’ll continue standing here, facing the corner, while you set your blaster pistol to stun. For safety’s sake, I suggest you put your helmet back on. Then you may fire whenever you’re ready.”

Looking from Nuru to Breaker, Cleaver said, “Commander Nuru, may I ask how you knew that Master Breaker had removed his helmet if you did not see him do it?”

“Because when he wears his helmet, he speaks through a comlink microphone,” Nuru answered. “One can hear the difference.”

“Oh,” Cleaver said. “I must listen more carefully.”

Ignoring the droid, Breaker said, “Commander Nuru, you’re not serious, are you? I mean, about me shooting at you?”

“I’m quite serious,” Nuru said. “Consider this a test. If do you strike me, I’ll only be knocked out briefly. If you don’t, we’ll all learn a different lesson. Go on, Breaker. Reset your blaster, then draw it and fire. Give it your best shot.”

Breaker at the other troopers. Sharp said, “I don’t think this is a good idea.”

Ryder Windham

Knuckles said, "I don't, either, but ... if we're to learn a lesson, I'd rather learn it here and now than under less controlled circumstances."

More confused than ever, Cleaver said, "Does meditating usually lead to people firing blasters inside starships?"

"Maybe just this one time, Cleaver," Nuru said. "Breaker, I'm ready when you are."

"All right, Commander," Breaker said. "But I sincerely hope you know what you're doing." He put his helmet back on, then said, "I'm reaching to my pistol now, but only to reset it." He moved his right hand to the holster secured against the armor that covered his right hip. After using his black-gloved thumb to set the blaster on stun, he shifted his hand away from the holster. The other troopers and Cleaver moved away from Breaker, giving him room.

Breaker gazed through his helmet's T-visor, keeping his eyes fixed on the back of Nuru's tunic, at the area between the boy's shoulder blades. Nuru's hands remained gently clasped behind his back. Breaker did not have to look at the optical readout in his visor to estimate the distance between him and the young Jedi. He could clearly see it was barely three meters.

Breaker's right hand wavered beside his holster, and then his arm went slack. He sighed. "I don't think I can do this, Commander Nuru," he said. "Shooting a Jedi goes completely against all my training on Kamino."

"You're still assuming you'll hit me, Breaker," Nuru said. "Remember, this is only a test. A stun won't kill me. Trust me."

"I do trust you," Breaker said, "but I can't do this. It just feels ... wrong."

"What if I gave you a direct order?"

Breaker shook his head and said, "I don't know."

"Then I order you to draw your weapon and shoot me."

Breaker moved fast, and without hesitation. The fingers of his right hand were still racing toward his blaster's grip when Nuru — having already sensed the movement from behind — sent his

STAR WARS: Curse of the Black Hole Pirates

own hand flying to his belt. Nuru seized his lightsaber, leaving his Master's weapon dangling from its clip.

The blaster leaped into Breaker's hand. At the same moment, Nuru activated his lightsaber, igniting its blue blade of pure energy as he spun to face Breaker.

Breaker's arm swung up and he squeezed the blaster's trigger, launching a fiery laser bolt at Nuru's chest. Nuru kept his red eyes locked on Breaker's T-visor as he shifted his wrists slightly, rapidly adjusting the angle of his lightsaber to meet the oncoming bolt.

The bolt struck the blade and bounced back at Breaker, smacking into the armor plate that covered his upper left arm. Although the stunning bolt carried a diminished charge, the impact made Breaker flinch and his left leg buckled under him. He squeezed off another shot before he went down on his left knee.

Nuru's blade flicked through the air again, smacking the second bolt into the metal deck as he leaped forward. Holding tight to his lightsaber with one hand, he lashed out with the other and plucked the pistol out of Breaker's hand. Breaker's response was pure reflex as his own hand launched after the pistol and clamped around Nuru's wrist.

Breaker gasped, "You ... you're all right, Commander Nuru?"

"I'm fine, Breaker," Nuru said, his voice eerily unemotional as he deactivated his lightsaber. "If this had been a real assassination attempt, I wouldn't have just taken your weapon away. You can let go of my wrist now."

Only then did Breaker realize that he was still gripping Nuru's wrist. As Breaker released his hold, Sharp stepped over beside Knuckles and Chatterbox and muttered, "I had no idea Commander Nuru move so fast!"

Cleaver said, "Perhaps *I* should try meditating?"

Gunn came running back into the main cabin. She bellowed, "Don't tell me that wasn't blaster fire I just heard!" Then she noticed the helmeted trooper kneeling in front of Nuru. She also

Ryder Windham

saw that Nuru held the trooper's blaster pistol in one hand and his lightsaber in the other.

Gunn shook her head with disgust. "I'm not even going to ask what you two were up to," she said. "I want you all to grab a seat and get belted in now! Everyone but you, that is." She stepped over to the three standing troopers and grabbed one by the arm. "Let's go, Chatterbox," she said. "You're coming to the cockpit right now!" She hauled the astonished trooper toward the passage tube.

As soon as Gunn and the trooper had exited the cabin, Cleaver said, "Unless my short-term memory is faulty, I believe Captain Gunn has mistaken Sharp for Chatterbox."

Knuckles said, "Cleaver, you took the words right out of my mouth."

He looked to Chatterbox, who was in fact still standing beside him. Knuckles said, "Chatterbox, maybe you should have said something before Gunn dragged Sharp off with her?"

Chatterbox shrugged.

Breaker was still kneeling on the deck beside Nuru. As Nuru handed the blaster pistol back to him, Breaker said, "I'm sorry."

"You've no reason to be." Nuru said as he clipped his lightsaber to his belt. "I owe you an apology. I didn't mean to make you fall on your injured leg. Here, let me help you up."

"Thanks," Breaker said as he placed a hand on the boy's shoulder. Rising to his feet, he said, "I'm glad to know you can defend yourself, Commander Nuru, but ... I hope you never give me an order like that again!" He removed his helmet, then reached up to rub the side of his head. "Going against my basic training makes my brain ache."

Just then, Gunn's angry shouts echoed down from the cockpit.

"Uh-oh," Knuckles said. "Sounds like Captain Gunn just sorted out that she's not with Chatterbox."

A few seconds later, Sharp returned to the main cabin. Facing Chatterbox, he said, "I *tried* identifying myself to Captain Gunn

STAR WARS: Curse of the Black Hole Pirates

before we reached the cockpit.” He aimed a thumb at the passage tube and added, “She’d like to have a word with you.”

Chatterbox’s brow furrowed. He turned to face Nuru. Nuru said, “It might be best if you go and listen to what she has to say, Chatterbox. Keep in mind, she is the captain of this vessel.”

Chatterbox sighed.

As he stepped into the passage tube to the he muttered, “Duty calls.”

Nuru gestured to the cabin’s seats. “We’d best buckle up. We’ll be exiting hyperspace soon.”

Knuckles, Sharp, and Breaker seated themselves on the acceleration couch, a padded bench with a mismatched conform-lounge back. Cleaver looked at the two remaining seats, then said, “Commander Nuru, does one have to stand in order to meditate, or can it be done while sitting?”

“Either way,” Nuru said. “Why do you ask?”

Cleaver gestured to the nearest empty seat and said, “With your permission, Commander, may I sit there so I can face the corner? I would like to try meditating.”

Nuru did not know whether any droid was capable of meditating, but he said politely, “Of course, Cleaver. The corner is yours.”

As he arranged himself in his seat, Cleaver glanced back at Nuru and said, “I have never thought of nothing before.”

Nuru smiled. “Take your time.”

Chapter Three

"I do not believe I am meditating correctly, Commander Nuru," Cleaver said from his seat in the *Hasty Harpy's* main cabin.

The droid had been silent for days, and his voice surprised Nuru. Nuru was sitting beside Breaker on the other side of the cabin, viewing a holographic star chart. The *Harpy* was once again traveling through hyperspace, on the last leg of her journey into the Unknown Regions.

Cleaver continued, "I have been staring at this corner for one hundred and forty-six hours, eleven minutes, and thirty-eight seconds and counting, but my behavioral circuitry matrix is the same as before I started. How will I know when I am relaxed?"

"I'm not sure I'm qualified to answer that question, Cleaver," Nuru said, ignoring Knuckles and Sharp as the arm-wrestled on the cabin's workbench. "To be honest," Nuru continued, "I have no idea whether droids *can* meditate."

Cleaver said, "Oh."

Hearing the disappointment in the droid's voice, Nuru added, "But you certainly *looked* like you were meditating, Cleaver. You didn't even budge when Breaker transmitted the Chancellor's Chiss linguistic data onto your language memory disc."

"He did?" Cleaver said, surprised. "I did not know I even had a language memory disc."

STAR WARS: Curse of the Black Hole Pirates

“For what it's worth,” Nuru added, “I don’t know of any Jedi who ever sat still for so long.”

Rising from his seat, Cleaver flexed his metal arms and said, “I believe my joints do feel a bit more relaxed. Perhaps I did my time wisely.”

“Ha!” Knuckles said as he slammed Sharp’s arm down against the workbench. “That's 517 to 483! I tell Chatterbox!”

“You'll have to wait for Captain Gunn to release him from navi-computer monitoring duty,” Sharp said as he unlocked his from Knuckles' grasp. “Maybe we should try wrestling with our left arms for a change?”

Without looking away from the star chart, Breaker said, “Actually, you two might want to postpone the next match. If the charts and data provided by the Chancellor's office are correct, we'll be arriving in orbit of Csilla in fifty-two minutes.”

Thanks to their respective training and conditioning, Nuru and the troopers were physically and psychologically prepared for long journeys in relatively confined spaces. Still, after so many days in the *Hasty Harpy*, all the time sleeping in rotation because the freighter's crew quarters only had three bunks, they were all eager to get out.

Nuru returned his attention to the star chart to reexamine their path across and beyond the edge of the galaxy. After leaving Kynachi, they had made their way to the Entralla Route and traveled down to Ord Mantell, where they had refueled and picked up supplies. They had proceeded via the Celanon Spur past Vicondor, and down the Namadii Corridor to Dorin, homeworld of the Kel Dor. Up until that point, Lalo Gunn had been familiar with the hyperlanes, but she was not daunted by the loss of her navigator droid, Teejay. In fact, she seemed most enthusiastic about training Chatterbox to help her operate her freighter.

Using the navigational coordinates provided by Chancellor Palpatine, they had arrived in the Mondress Sector, and then proceeded to the Albanin Sector before they'd entered the

Ryder Windham

Unknown Regions. With six more days of travel still ahead, they trusted that the Chancellor's coordinates would deliver them to Chiss space.

Turning to Nuru, Breaker said, "I imagine you're excited about seeing Csilla?"

Nuru did not answer, but stared hard at the holographic display of stars.

Breaker said, "Something wrong?"

Nuru blinked his red eyes, glanced at Breaker, then returned his gaze to the holographic display. He said, "I regret my training at the Jedi Temple didn't quite prepare me for this mission."

Knuckles and Sharp overheard Nuru's remark. "What?!" Knuckles responded. "*You*, Commander Nuru? Not prepared? How can you say that after the way you handled yourself on Kynachi?"

Sharp added, "Or after the way you helped liberate Kynachi from those infernal droids?" Glancing at the droid commando on the other side of the cabin, Sharp added, "No offense, Cleaver."

"None taken, sir," Cleaver replied.

Breaker said, "Knuckles and Sharp are right, Commander Nuru. Your training at the Jedi Temple probably prepared you for more than you realize."

"Being able to fight is one thing," Nuru said. "But going on a diplomatic mission to Csilla? That's another thing entirely."

Breaker said, "Chancellor Palpatine and General Yoda wouldn't have sent you to Csilla if they didn't believe you were ready."

Nuru shook his head. "You don't understand, Breaker," he said. "I've never met another Chiss. Ever. I don't like to admit this but ... well, nervous."

Sharp said, "Because you still can't understand their languages?"

"Thanks for reminding me," Nuru said. "I'm supposed to meet a diplomat whose name I can barely pronounce." He tried saying the name slowly. "*Sev'eere'nuruodo*"

STAR WARS: Curse of the Black Hole Pirates

Breaker said, "You can't be nervous, Commander. Cleaver should be able to translate for you."

Surprised, Cleaver said, "I should?"

Breaker faced the droid and said, "Weren't you listening? Your language memory disc now contains Chiss linguistic data, so you can be Nuru's translator. Go on, let's hear you say something in Cheunh, like ... 'Thank you for your hospitality.'"

A flurry of alien words came out of Cleaver's vocabulator. When he was done, Cleaver looked at Nuru and said, "I could not ascertain a Cheunh word for *hospitality*, but I incorporated synonyms for *comradely service*. Do you think that is a sufficient translation?"

"I have absolutely no idea," Nuru said, hanging his head. "But it's not the language I'm nervous about. It's ... well, I don't know how I'll react when I see other Chiss for the first time. On Coruscant, I'm afraid I grew uncomfortable with the idea that I was somewhat unique, that I might never meet another Chiss. It's hard for me to imagine being among people who look like me."

"Oh, if only the boys and I had *that* problem," Knuckles said with a chuckle as he made a gesturing wave to Sharp and Breaker.

"Sorry," Nuru said. "You must think I'm being ridiculous."

"Not at all, Commander." Knuckles shook his head. "But I don't think you should be nervous that you've yet to meet another Chiss."

"Really?" Nuru said. "Why not?"

Knuckles aimed a finger at Nuru and said, "Because you're Nuru Kungurama. A Jedi. And no one in Chiss space has ever met *you* before."

Sharp said, "Nicely put, Knuckles."

Breaker clapped Nuru on the shoulder and said, "You have nothing to worry about. Everything will go fine."

"Where's Csilla?" Nuru said.

Ryder Windham

He was sitting on the small seat that folded out from the wall behind Lalo Gunn and Chatterbox in the *Hasty Harpy's* cockpit. The *Harpy* had just dropped out of hyperspace, and the Corellian YT-1760 transport's centrally configured cockpit offered a wide field of vision. Based on the coordinates that Supreme Chancellor Palpatine had provided, Nuru had expected to arrive in sight of the planet Csilla, a large, glacial world. But as he peered past the shoulders of Gunn and Chatterbox and gazed through the cockpit's transparisteel windows, he saw only a field of distant stars.

"No nearby planets on the scopes," Gunn said. "And the nearest star is three light years away. Chatterbox, you triple-checked the navi-computer before the last jump, right?"

Chatterbox nodded.

Nuru said, "What's going on?"

Gunn said, "Our position is correct, except ... no Csilla."

"What do you mean no Csilla?" Nuru said. "Where is it?"

"That's what I'm trying to tell you, kid. It ain't there. It's-"

"Look!" Nuru interrupted. He extended his arm past Chatterbox and pointed to the viewport. "Something's out there!"

Gunn and Chatterbox followed Nuru's gaze to see a dark, triangular object, a silhouette suspended against the starfield. Gunn consulted her sensor scopes and said, "It might be a ship or a station, but I can't tell. My sensors aren't picking up any signals." She adjusted the sensor controls and added, "Maybe it's using a sensor jammer. The scopes can't even determine that thing's size or how far away it is."

A warning light flashed on the *Harpy's* control console. Gunn said, "We're being scanned."

In the indistinct distance across space, the dark object shifted slightly, and one of its sides seemed to swell outward. A moment later, lights flickered on across the object, revealing it had a curved surface, and that its true shape was not a triangle but a cone. The cone rotated and came to a stop so that it appeared to

STAR WARS: Curse of the Black Hole Pirates

be inverted, with its sharply tapered end pointing “down” from the *Harpy's* perspective.

Another light flashed on the *Harpy's* console. From the comlink, a strangely neutral but synthetic voice said, “Chiss Expansionary Defense Force Station Ifpe’a to unidentified starship. State your purpose.”

Gunn glanced back at Nuru. “I am Nuru Kungurama of the Jedi Order,” he said. “Supreme Chancellor Palpatine of the Galactic Republic sent me here in response to a request from an ambassador of the Chiss Ascendancy, Aristocra Sev'eere'nuruodo.”

After a brief silence, the synthetic voice replied, “Shut down sublight engines and all weapons systems. Await docking procedure.”

Gunn muttered, “Not exactly a warm welcome.”

The clone said, “I have a bad feeling about this.”

“Who asked *you*?” Gunn said as she threw a quick jab at Chatterbox’s shoulder.

Nuru said, “I’m surprised that the voice from the station spoke Basic. From the data I examined, I thought the Chiss were so isolated that they’re not conversant in any languages from Republic space.”

“Thanks for the history lesson,” Gunn said sarcastically. “So, what do we do now?”

Nuru thought hard. He was disturbed that their exit from hyperspace hadn't delivered them to Csilla. Finally, he said, “Follow their instructions. Shut down the engines and weapons. And let's keep in mind that we’re invited guests, even if we didn't arrive where we expected.”

“You're the boss,” Gunn said.

While Gunn and Chatterbox pushed buttons and adjusted controls, Nuru kept his eyes on the conical vessel. The *Harpy's* engines powered down, and the freighter began to drift. A moment later, the *Harpy* lurched forward, heading toward the Chiss station.

Ryder Windham

Nuru said, "Tractor beam?"

"Yup," Gunn replied, scowling.

As the invisible tractor beam drew the *Harpy* closer to the Chiss station, Nuru, Gunn, and Chatterbox realized the station was much larger than it had appeared from a distance. Gunn glanced at her scopes again and said, "Scanners are still coming up empty, but by my eye, that station's about a thousand meters tall."

A wide, triangular door slid back on the station's side, and the *Harpy* slowly glided in through the open door and into a docking bay. Dimly illuminated by yellowish lights, the docking bay consisted of an oval landing pad enveloped by a curved, pale green wall that was smooth and without windows. As the tractor beam deposited the *Harpy* on the landing pad, the bay's triangular door slid shut, sealing the bay.

The *Harpy's* sensor scopes crackled with activity, surprising Gunn and Chatterbox. "Whoa," Gunn said. "We're picking up lots of strange energy readings." Looking at a data stream, she added, "I can't make heads or tails out of most of this info, but it looks like this bay has a breathable atmosphere."

"Let's tell the others," Nuru said as he scrambled out of the cockpit.

The *Harpy's* landing ramp extended to the docking bay floor. Nuru was the first to emerge, followed by Cleaver, the four troopers, and Gunn. The troopers were fully armored and carried their blaster rifles slung over their shoulders.

Gunn lingered at the bottom of the landing ramp, looked around and said, "No one to greet us? Did the Chancellor's data about the Chiss say anything about a chilly reception?"

"Patience," the young Jedi said as he eyed the docking bay's smooth walls. "They are probably still scanning us."

A thin, diagonal strip of light pulsed against a lower section of the wall, where the wall sloped in to meet the floor. The strip of light grew brighter and expanded to reveal an illuminated

STAR WARS: Curse of the Black Hole Pirates

doorway. A humanoid silhouette stood in the doorway, and then the mysterious figure stepped forward into the hangar.

For the first time in his life, Nuru faced another Chiss. Like Nuru, the unidentified Chiss had blue skin, glowing red eyes, and gleaming black hair. The Chiss was attired in a crisp, black uniform with orange tabs at the collar.

Nuru had assumed that his first encounter would be with a group of Chiss, not an individual. Despite his training at the Jedi Temple, where he had learned much about staying objective and not making judgments based on immediate impressions, his very first thought as he looked at the Chiss before him was, She's beautiful.

Chapter Four

The female Chiss moved away from the illuminated doorway and came to a stop in front of Nuru. She was slightly taller than the young Jedi, but she kept her chin elevated as she faced him.

Nuru stared into the girl's red eyes. Her skin was smooth and unlined, and he suspected she was not much older than he. Her facial expression was so neutral that it held no trace of emotion. Nuru felt tongue-tied. He struggled to remember the greeting he had practiced in the Cheunh language. Unable to recall the words, he bowed at the waist.

The girl responded by widening her eyes as she took a cautious step backward.

Nuru had intended his bow as a gesture of courtesy, but realized that bowing might be inappropriate in Chiss space. Fearing that he'd either frightened or insulted the girl, he remembered the phrase he had rehearsed.

"Pavl'cha sertketch Jedi lommeeth'ree," he said, trying not to bite his tongue. "Nuru Kungurama agad nac'shu Republic depostchu'ukak tah Palpatine. Pavl'cha ferch'sti'onmell Aristocra Sev'eere'nuruodo."

The girl replied, "You are called ... Nuru Kungurama?"

Nuru was surprised to hear the girl speak in accentless Basic. He smiled and said yes. The girl held his gaze but did not reply.

STAR WARS: Curse of the Black Hole Pirates

Nuru continued, "I ... I am to meet with Aristocra Sev'eere'nuruodo."

"I am Aristocra Sev'eere'nuruodo."

"Oh," Nuru said, and realized from how she'd pronounced her own name that he had pronounced it incorrectly. "I ..." He almost blurted out, *I was expecting someone older*, but he caught himself and said instead, "I, um, didn't know you spoke Basic. And I hope you aren't upset ... I mean, I hope you will forgive me for mispronouncing your name. I'm afraid I ... I'm having a difficult time learning Cheunh."

Gunn remained standing beside the *Harpy's* landing ramp. She and Chatterbox glanced at each other, but quickly returned their attention to Nuru and the Chiss girl.

Keeping her eyes fixed on Nuru, the girl said, "You are encouraged to refer to me as Veeren. It is, you might say, an abbreviation of Sev'eere'nuruodo."

"Thank you, Veeren," Nuru said. "And you may call me Nuru."

The girl winced slightly. "I shall ... consider it," she said.

Nuru wondered if he had offended the girl somehow. Trying to collect his thoughts, he remembered his mission and said, "Veeran, there is something that puzzles me. My government's leader, Supreme Chancellor Palpatine, gave us navigational coordinates that he said would deliver us to the Csilla system. However, the nearest star is light years away from our present position."

"Your leader misled you," Veeren said.

"What?" Nuru replied. "But ... why would he do that?"

"I did not say he misled you *deliberately*," Veeren said coolly. "I merely said that he misled you. My original communication to him was quite clear, that I wished to meet with a representative of the Republic. I provided data to lead a Republic ship through hyperspace to this station. If your Chancellor inferred that the navigational coordinates would lead to Csilla, he was mistaken."

Ryder Windham

Using his Force powers, Nuru sensed that Veeren was not attempting to deceive him. Although he found her voice and manner somewhat off-putting, the way she spoke without a trace of warmth, he also sensed she wasn't hostile.

Veeran gestured to the right of the illuminated doorway. The curved wall slid silently to the side, exposing a transparent window that offered a view into an adjoining, undecorated chamber. At the center of the chamber were two large, inverted cones that echoed the shape of the space station. Hovering a few centimeters above the bare floor, the cones rotated slightly to reveal each was partially hollow and held a round seat. Nuru realized they were chairs.

Veeran said, "You and I shall adjourn to the conference room. Your companions will remain here. They will not be able to hear us, but can monitor us through the window."

Nuru glanced back at Gunn and the troopers, then said, "But ... well, I'm eager to talk with you, but it's been a very long journey. Is it possible that my friends might have some refreshments?"

Veeran's expression remained inscrutable as she said, "*Refreshments?*"

"Yes," Nuru said. "Food and drink?"

Veeran hesitated for a moment, then said, "Do I understand correctly, that you traveled here without food and drink? Or do you expect *me* to provide food and drink?"

"Uh, maybe not you personally," Nuru said. "Forgive me, Veeran. I am ignorant of Chiss etiquette. I meant no insult."

"No matter," Veeran said. "Our meeting will not be long," She turned for the illuminated doorway.

Nuru realized that Veeran seemed to have no interest in whether he and his allies had sufficient nourishment. Unsure whether Veeran being deliberately rude or behaving like a typical Chiss, the young Jedi was about to follow her into the adjoining room when someone behind him said, "Ahem." It was Breaker, clearing his throat.

STAR WARS: Curse of the Black Hole Pirates

Both Veeren and Nuru stopped and turned to face the helmeted trooper. Nuru said, "Yes, Breaker?"

"Begging your pardon, Commander," Breaker said, "but Cleaver should accompany you. He *is* your translator, and would be most useful in the event of any accidental miscommunication between you and the aristocra."

Nuru looked from Breaker to Cleaver, and then back to Breaker again. Nuru sensed all the troopers thought the same thing, that it was a bad idea for him to become separated from the Breakout Squad. Although Nuru had not perceived any threats on the station, he did not dismiss the troopers' shared concern. Their job was to protect him, and their ability to do that would be limited if they were separated by even a short distance. Which was why they wanted Cleaver to go with him, not so much to serve as his translator but as his backup.

Nuru looked back at Veeren, whose eyes had never left him. Nuru said, "Yes, of course. My translator must join us."

The refurbished droid commando stepped up beside Nuru. Without taking her eyes off Nuru, Veeren spoke in rapid Cheunh. Nuru was still wondering whether she had just made a short statement or asked a question when Cleaver offered an equally fast response. The only word Nuru caught was *crabsystor*, which meant *commander*.

Veeran's red eyes flicked to the droid and back to Nuru. She said, "Your translator will join us."

Nuru looked at the droid. "You both spoke so fast, I couldn't understand."

Cleaver replied, "Essentially, Aristocra Sev'eere'nuruodo asked if my commander could be trusted. And essentially, I replied that I trust my commander more than any other Chiss that I have ever met."

Nuru's mouth almost fell open. "You didn't!" he said, aghast.

The droid looked at Veeren and added, "I believe I pronounced every word correctly?"

"You did," Veeren said.

Ryder Windham

Nuru shook his head. "Aristocra, I'm sorry if you think my translator implied that he trusts me more than he trusts you."

"You should not be sorry," Veeren said. "Your mechanical translator's response was immediate and technically accurate. He is correct in that he has no reason to trust me. And had he expounded on your honor, I would have suspected he was engineered to promote you for political purposes."

"Oh," Nuru said, "I, uh, wouldn't have wanted you to suspect that."

She gestured again toward the doorway. Nuru and Cleaver followed her out, and the door sealed behind them. To the right of the door, the window remained open, allowing those still in the docking bay to see Nuru and Veeren sit in the conical seats while Cleaver came to a stop beside Nuru.

Peering through the window, Knuckles muttered, "Well, I guess now we know that Cleaver was right about something earlier. There is definitely *not* a Cheunh word for hospitality."

Breaker said, "Remember, fellas ... different people, different customs. For all we know, that girl was being polite by Chiss standards."

"That may be," Sharp said, "but I can't say I like the way the Aristocra talks to Commander Nuru. She just seems ... disrespectful."

Lalo Gunn had remained standing at the bottom of the *Harpy's* landing ramp. Gazing through the window at the two seated figures, she said, "If you ask me, the Chiss girl has Nuru's undivided attention. Our little Jedi friend may not like her manners either, but he wants to like her. The way he looked at her and stammered, it was more than a little obvious. Chatterbox noticed it, too."

Breaker, Sharp, and Knuckles all looked at Chatterbox and said simultaneously, "Really?"

Chatterbox nodded.

STAR WARS: Curse of the Black Hole Pirates

Seated across from Veeren in the conference room, Nuru said, "Will anyone else be joining us?"

"No," Veeren replied firmly.

"Oh," Nuru said. He glanced at Cleaver, who stood beside him, then looked back at Veeren. He said, "It's just ... well, I expected I'd be meeting more Chiss. Maybe because I sense there are others on board ... watching us?"

Veeran remained silent for a moment, then said, "A security detail is monitoring this room and also the docking bay. You will explain your understanding of this meeting's purpose."

"All right," Nuru said, shifting in his seat, which wasn't very comfortable. "Chancellor Palpatine informed me that an ambassador of the Chiss Ascendancy contacted his office, requesting to meet with a representative of the Jedi Order. The Chancellor expressed his hope that this would be an opportunity to begin diplomatic relations between our governments. He assigned me to this mission because he believed you would be pleased to meet a Chiss Jedi."

"*Please* me?" Veeren said. "Your Chancellor assumes much."

Confused, Nuru said, "You ... are disappointed?"

"Defense Force Station Ifpe'a is *not* a pleasure craft."

Nuru said, "I regret I am not communicating clearly. I believe the Chancellor, in sending me, hoped to show that Chiss are not strangers to the Republic. Would you have preferred a different Jedi?"

Veeran seemed to study Nuru's face, then said, "Although I thought I understood your language, I do not understand why you ask questions that reveal your ignorance."

Taken aback, Nuru said, "Well, I ask questions to gain knowledge."

"Your methods of diplomacy are very strange," Veeren said. "You would not object if I asked you questions?"

"No, not at all."

"What do you know of your heritage?"

Ryder Windham

"My heritage?" Nuru said, surprised by the question. "I ... I am a Jedi. I was raised at the Temple on Coruscant."

"And how did you arrive at the Jedi Temple?"

"A Jedi discovered a Chiss ship's escape pod drifting in the Outer Rim. I was the pod's only occupant. I was an infant."

"And how did you come by the name *Nuru Kungurama*?" Her upper lip sneered slightly as she pronounced his name.

"According to the Jedi who found me, a data cylinder identified me by that name."

"What is the total firepower of your Republic fleet?"

"What?!" Nuru said, startled by the sudden change in course of the questioning. "I ... I don't believe I'm at liberty to share that information."

Veeran replied, "You should be so cautious with *all* information."

Feeling as if he were incapable of saying, anything right, Nuru glanced at Cleaver, who had been standing beside him in silence the entire time. Nuru said, "I don't suppose you have any data about Chiss protocol?"

"No," Cleaver said. "but if you need me to translate anything, let me know."

"Thanks," Nuru said. Looking at Veeran, he again tried to regain his composure. "With all due respect, Aristocra, I believe this meeting would be more productive if you explained why you requested a representative of the Jedi Order to travel to this station."

"Of course," Veeran said. "The Chiss Expansionary Defense Force has reliable sources throughout your galaxy. We are aware of the civil war between the Republic and Separatists, and that many Jedi are now in command of the Republic's armies. Twenty days ago, a cluster of unidentified spacecrafts was sighted near our borders before they escaped into hyperspace. I am compelled to-

Nuru leaned forward in his seat. "Forgive me for interrupting," he said, "but I believe I should have told you

STAR WARS: Curse of the Black Hole Pirates

something earlier. During my communication with Chancellor Palpatine, he mentioned that the Separatists might have spies in Chiss space, which was why he proposed sending me on a classified mission to meet you. I imagine it's possible that the unidentified spacecraft belonged to the Separatists."

Veeran stared at Nuru for a moment, and then, completely ignoring his interruption, she continued, "I am compelled to inform the Jedi Order that our defense force has increased border patrols, and will not tolerate trespassers."

Nuru waited for Veeran to say more, then realized she seemed to be done. He said, "I don't understand. Are you implying that the unidentified spacecraft may have been ... vessels carrying Jedi?"

"I am not implying anything," Veeran said. "I am *telling* you that the Chiss Expansionary Defense Force will not tolerate trespassers."

Nuru raised his eyebrows quizzically. "You want the Republic *and* Separatists to stay away?"

"Correct," Veeran said. "The Chiss Ascendancy has no interest in your war. If either the Republic or Separatists regards the Chiss Expansionary Defense Force as a potential ally, it would be a grave error in judgment. You may leave now."

Nuru was stunned. He could barely believe that he had been encouraged to travel with the Breakout Squad so far across space, only to be dismissed by this Chiss ambassador and told to never return. He realized just how much he had hoped to learn about his native world and people, and with that hope dashed, his disappointment was almost crushing. *I really wasn't prepared for this mission*, he thought.

But he also remembered he was a Jedi.

Nuru took a deep breath to calm himself. Rising from his seat, he said, "I thank you for your time, Aristocra Sev'eere'nuruodo. I shall relay your message to Chancellor Palpatine as soon as—"

A muffled explosion interrupted Nuru. Veeran turned her head to the side and said, "Status."

Ryder Windham

From a hidden audio unit behind Veeren's chair, a disembodied voice replied, "Incoming."

"Incoming?" Nuru repeated as he and Cleaver turned to the viewport to see their allies beside the *Hasty Harpy*. The four troopers had heard the explosion, too, and had already unslung their blaster rifles.

More explosions sounded. Behind Veeren's chair, a section of wall slid back to reveal a wide viewscreen. Veeren's chair swiveled in the air, turning fast so she could face the screen, on which appeared the image of a black-uniformed male Chiss.

"We are under attack, Aristocra," said the officer from the screen. "An armada dropped out from hyperspace."

Veeran said, "Display."

The viewscreen shimmered. The officer's image vanished and was instantly replaced by the spectacle of more than a dozen warships and countless *Vulture*-class droid starfighters swarming the space station.

Nuru exclaimed, "Separatist fighters!" And then he sighted a bulky Metalorn yacht among the warships, and recalled that Overseer Umbrag of the Techno Union owned such a vessel.

The station shuddered violently as it was wracked by a more devastating series of explosions.

Watching the viewscreen, Veeren said, "They could not have arrived at this location by accident." She swiveled her seat to face Nuru, "Someone led them here."

Chapter Five

Nuru was astonished by Veeren's accusation. Before he could respond, the Chiss space station buckled under the force of a singular massive shockwave, and a loud, electric hum filled the air. The power of the blast sent Cleaver lurching backward across the meeting room. Veeren tumbled out of her hovering chair, which was left spinning in the air. Nuru braced his legs as he caught Veeren, turning his head fast to prevent her nose from colliding with his jaw.

"Let go!" Veeren said as she pushed herself away from Nuru. She staggered toward the viewscreen. Before she could reach it, the viewscreen made a crackling noise and fizzled off. A split second later, the meeting room and the docking bay were thrown into darkness.

In the docking bay, the troopers activated the tactical spot lamps on their helmets. While Chatterbox and Sharp trained their spot lamps on the surrounding walls and held their positions beside the *Hasty Harpy*, Breaker and Knuckles darted through the doorway that led to the meeting room.

Emergency lights flickered on, and the meeting room's viewscreen winked back to life. Veeren faced the viewscreen and said, "Status." The viewscreen flashed three times, then died again along with the emergency lights.

Ryder Windham

As Breaker and Knuckles raced into the meeting room, their spot lamps landed on Cleaver as he tottered back beside Nuru. "Who hit us?" Knuckles asked.

Nuru said, "Separatist warships!"

"Status!" Veeren repeated sharply. The viewscreen flickered again.

The electric hum grew louder. Out of the corner of his helmet's T-visor, Breaker saw the viewscreen brighten unexpectedly. Although he knew nothing about Chiss technology, his instincts told him that the station's energy systems were overloading, and that he wouldn't be able to warn the others fast enough.

"Down!" Breaker shouted as he launched his armored body between the viewscreen and Veeren. The trooper was still in midair when the viewscreen exploded. His armor took most of the blast as he wrapped his arms around the Chiss girl.

Breaker grunted as he hit the floor, letting his right arm and leg take the impact. He held the girl close against his chest, protecting the back of her head with his left hand as they rolled to a stop against the base of the wall.

Smoke poured out from the ruined viewscreen and began to fill the meeting room. Knuckles directed his spot lamp at the two figures on the floor. Nuru moved past the floating conical chairs, fell to Breaker's side, and said, "Are you two all right?"

"Never better," Breaker muttered as he carefully extracted himself from Veeren. But as he shifted his black-gloved hand out from under her head, she slumped against the floor.

Nuru felt his stomach clench. He moved his hand to Veeren's neck, and exhaled with relief when he found a pulse. "She's alive!" As smoke continued to fill the room, he added, "We have to get her out of here. Now!"

Knuckles picked up Veeren while Cleaver and Nuru helped Breaker to his feet. They moved fast out of the meeting room and returned to the docking bay, where they found Sharp and Chatterbox waiting for them. Sharp asked, "Who's hitting us?"

STAR WARS: Curse of the Black Hole Pirates

“Separatist warships!” Nuru replied, and then he heard a loud crack from above. The docking bay’s ceiling was buckling. “Where’s Gunn?”

Chatterbox aimed a thumb at the *Hasty Harpy* as Sharp said, “Inside! Come on!” Sharp made sure everyone made it up the landing ramp, and then followed them in, just as the *Harpy*’s engines roared to life.

“Take care of the Aristocral!” Nuru shouted to the troopers as the ramp lifted behind him. The freighter’s engines thundered louder. Nuru bolted to the cockpit. He came up fast behind Gunn’s seat and said, “Gunn, we’re under attack by-”

“Everyone on board?” Gunn interrupted.

“Yes, but-”

“No time for ‘buts,’ kid!” Gunn said as she flipped control switches. “It’s time to leave!” She pressed a trigger and the *Harpy*’s laser cannon opened fire, punching a large hole in the docking bay’s sealed door. The docking bay’s air whipped out through the breach and into space. The *Harpy* lifted off the landing pad and began drifting toward the opening. Gunn made a quick adjustment to her cannon’s control and fired again, expanding the hole.

“Gunn!” Nuru cried as he gripped the back of Gunn’s seat. “There’s a Separatist armada out there!”

“Too bad for them!” Gunn said. She moved both hands to the flight controls and launched the *Harpy* out through the gaping hole in the door. The *Harpy*’s tail had barely cleared the breach when the docking bay’s ceiling collapsed, spraying debris behind the fleeing ship.

Droid starfighters were everywhere. Two fighters flew directly into the *Harpy*’s path and collided with her energy shields. As the Corellian transport bounced at the impact, Gunn activated the intercom and shouted, “Chatterbox! Cockpit! Now!”

Gunn sent the *Harpy* into a steep dive away from the space station and accelerated. Through the cockpit windows, Nuru sighted the Metalorn yacht amid the Separatist warships, then

Ryder Windham

glimpsed dozens of small, cylindrical vessels streaking away from the station. Nuru assumed they were Chiss escape pods, and wondered if they were equipped with hyperdrives. He had his answer a moment later, as he watched all the vessels angle off in the same direction, and then rapidly vanish into space.

Nuru peeked at the sensor scopes and saw several droid fighters veer away from the station, moving in pursuit of Gunn's ship. A moment later, Chatterbox moved fast past Nuru and jumped into the seat beside Gunn.

Laser fire hammered at the *Harpy's* aft shields. Gunn took evasive action, sending the *Harpy* into a Controlled roll. She kept her eyes forward, not looking at Chatterbox as she commanded, "Enter an emergency transposal on our last jump into the navicomputer, just like I showed you how."

Chatterbox began pressing buttons on a console. Nuru said, "Emergency transposal?"

"That's right, kid," Gunn replied. "We can't outrun all those fighters, and we're in the *Unknown* Regions, remember? Our only chance of escaping this mess is through hyperspace, and the only route the navi-computer has for this area is back the way we came!"

"But that'll take days!" Nuru protested.

"We don't have a choice!" She activated the ship's intercom and said, "Everyone hang on, we're gonna jump!"

The *Harpy* swerved around another group of fighters, then shuddered as more laser fire pounded at her shields. Nuru sank his fingers deeper into the back of Gunn's seat and said, "How long before we jump?"

"We'd be doing it faster if your blue girlfriend had given us alternative routes to choose from!"

Another hail of laser fire streaked passed the cockpit. Looking at the back of Gunn's head, Nuru said, "Huh? Girlfriend?!"

Ignoring Nuru, Gunn snapped, "Is the navicomputer set?!"

STAR WARS: Curse of the Black Hole Pirates

Three agonizing seconds past as Chatterbox studied a technical readout, then turned to Gunn and gave her a thumbs-up.

Gunn asked, "Where's the portal?"

Chatterbox pointed to a winking yellow spot on the navigational scope. Gunn glanced at the scope, saw the portal's location, and angled toward it. As they neared the portal, Gunn said, "Punch it!"

A droid fighter swooped in front of the *Harpy*. Gunn swerved to avoid hitting the fighter at the same time that Chatterbox pulled back on the lightspeed throttle. An instant later, the *Harpy* launched into hyperspace.

As the view through the cockpit windows transformed from distant points of light to long, brilliant streaks, Nuru gasped. "We made it!"

Gunn laughed. "That was a close one, all right."

"You said it," Chatterbox agreed.

Gunn punched Chatterbox in the arm. She said, "There you go, mouthing off again!" She glanced back at Nuru and said. "Go tell the others that we're in for another long trip."

Eager to check on the Aristocra, Nuru left the cockpit and went to the main cabin. As he ducked through the connective passage tube, he was wondering if Veeren was still unconscious when he heard a voice that gave him the answer.

"Where am I?!"

Stepping into the main cabin, Nuru found Veeren lying on the acceleration couch, with Knuckles and Sharp crouched on the deck beside her. Knuckles had strapped Veeren to the couch for her own safety during their hasty escape from the station. Now awake, she wriggled against the restraints. On the other side of the cabin, Cleaver stood beside Breaker, who had removed his helmet but remained seated.

Veeran freed one of her arms and tried to strike Sharp. Knuckles grabbed her wrist and said, "Hold still!"

"Release me at once!"

Ryder Windham

"We're trying to!"

"Aristocra," Nuru said firmly as he stepped closer to her, "please, be calm."

Veeran twisted her head to face Nuru. Her red eyes burned at him.

"Your viewscreen exploded in the conference room," Nuru said. "There was a lot of smoke, and the docking bay was collapsing. We had to get you out of there. You might have been killed if not for the quick action of this trooper."

He gestured to Breaker, who shifted in his seat while Cleaver helped him peel off his armor. Facing Breaker, Nuru said, "Are you all right?"

"Just a scrape," Breaker said. "But I need a fresh bacta patch for my ribcage." He turned to Cleaver, who handed him a medpac.

Nuru returned his attention to Veeran. As Knuckles and Sharp removed the straps that had held the girl in place, she sat up on the couch and glanced around the cabin's interior, taking in her surroundings.

"You're on our ship," Nuru said. "Your station was still under attack when we escaped." Turning back to Breaker, he said, "I saw a Metalorn yacht among the warships."

Breaker scowled. On Kynachi, he had witnessed Overseer Umbrag's escape from the planet on a Metalorn yacht. He said, "You think Umbrag led the attack?"

"I can't be certain. But how did he obtain the coordinates to reach the space station?" Nuru wondered. Turning to Gunn, he asked, "Could he have followed us through hyperspace?"

Before Gunn could answer, Veeran interrupted, "Return me to Defense Force Station at once."

"I regret that's impossible," Nuru said, "and not just because I don't know whether your station was completely destroyed. We're currently traveling through hyperspace on a preset course. It was the only way we could escape the assault. Apparently, your comrades chose the same method to evacuate. I saw many escape

STAR WARS: Curse of the Black Hole Pirates

pods jettison from the station. It looked like all of them made it into hyperspace.”

Through clenched teeth, Veeren said, “What is your course?”

Nuru knew that Veeren would not like his answer, and he felt his throat go dry. “The only navigational coordinates we had for this journey were the ones we used to reach your station, so we executed an emergency transposal to backtrack to our previous jump. If the hyperlane we’re presently traveling has a name, we weren’t informed of it, but I could show you our approximate position on a star map.”

“That won’t be necessary,” Veeren said. “You will do whatever you can to return me to Chiss space at once. If you do not, the ruling families of the Chiss Ascendancy will learn of the attack on Station Ifpe’a, and will assume that the Galactic Republic and the Separatist Alliance have joined forces against the Chiss. Your Chancellor will be notified that the Ascendancy acknowledges the attack as a declaration of war.”

“What?!” Nuru gasped. “But we were all victims of the Separatist attack.”

Veeran closed her eyes, held them shut, and then opened them slowly, her gaze now directed at the empty area of the deck between her and Nuru. She said, “I am Aristocra Sev’eere’nuruodo of the Second Ruling Family of the Chiss Ascendancy. You will receive no other information from me as long as you hold me captive.”

“Captive?” Nuru said. “Aristocra, we aren’t holding—”

Veeran’s eyes flicked to Nuru’s face, and her expression was so severe that it silenced him at once. “I am Aristocra Sev’eere’nuruodo,” she repeated, “of the Second Ruling Family of the Chiss Ascendancy.”

Nuru could not recall ever having met anyone who frustrated him as much as Veeren. He took a deep breath, exhaled slowly, then looked at Sharp and Knuckles. “The Aristocra is not our prisoner,” he said. “Make sure she’s comfortable. But keep an eye on her and don’t let her touch anything. For all we know,

Ryder Windham

she's responsible for luring the Separatist attack on her own station.”

“That’s ridiculous!” Veeren snapped.

Nuru, the three troopers, and Cleaver looked at Veeren. She realized that she had failed to remain silent, and she lowered her gaze to the deck.

Nuru wasn’t sure, but he thought he saw Veeren’s cheeks flush to a slightly deeper shade of blue.

Knuckles noticed Veeren’s color change, too, and muttered, “Is there a Chiss word for *embarrassed*?”

Nuru kept his gaze on Veeren. Using the Force, he sensed that she was not only flustered, but also angry. And frightened.

“Aristocra,” Nuru said, “you have made it clear that you don’t trust me. If you choose to remain silent, I doubt our relationship will improve. Still, you have my promise that we shall make every effort to return you to Chiss space as soon as possible. And I want very much to assure you that neither I nor anyone aboard this ship alerted the Separatists to your station’s location.”

Veeran looked up at Nuru. She said nothing. Nuru assumed she was ready to listen.

“As I understand the facts,” Nuru continued, “you provided the navigational coordinates to Chancellor Palpatine, and he relayed them directly to us. The Chancellor expressed concern over the possibility of Separatist spies in Chiss space, and you maintain that unidentified spacecraft were recently sighted near your borders. If you transmitted the coordinates to the Chancellor, is it possible that the Separatists intercepted the transmission?”

Veeran pursed her lips, then replied, “I am Aristocra Sev’eere’nuruodo of the Second Ruling Family of the Chiss Ascendancy.”

Nuru grimaced, then shook his head sadly. Tearing his gaze away from Veeren, he looked to Knuckles and Sharp. “We have a long ride ahead of us,” he said, “I’m going to the cockpit. Don’t let the Aristocra out of your sight.”

STAR WARS: Curse of the Black Hole Pirates

He turned for the passage tube and was about to exit the main cabin when he sensed another emotion radiating from the Chiss girl who remained seated on the couch, watching his back. The emotion was so intense that he came to a dead stop.

She hates me.

He turned and looked back at Veeren. Red eyes ablaze, her expression might have appeared unchanged to the troopers, but Nuru felt the difference, an increased tension in the air. She radiated fury.

Nuru's brow furrowed, and then he turned away and proceeded into the passage tube. He wondered why Veeren hated him. He doubted there was any point in asking.

An alarm blared in the cockpit, waking Nuru. He had fallen asleep in the copilot's seat, which Chatterbox had vacated so Nuru could get some rest and also keep his distance from Veeren, who remained in the main cabin. Nuru sat up fast and straight, and looked at Gunn just as she was slapping the alarm off. He said, "What's wrong?"

Gunn was in her own seat. Keeping one hand on the flight controls and both eyes at the luminescent flow of hyperspace outside the cockpit, she said, "We're gonna exit."

Surprised, Nuru automatically buckled his safety belt as he turned his head to examine a navigational readout. According to its inset chronometer, almost ten hours had passed since the *Hasty Harpy* had left Chiss space. He said, "We're not supposed to exit for another three days!"

Gunn activated the intercom and shouted, "Everyone hang on! We're dropping out!"

The *Harpy* shuddered. Nuru's safety belt bit into his lap as the freighter practically tumbled out of hyperspace. The hyperdrive automatically winded down at the same moment that the sublight engines kicked on. One of the sensor scopes emitted a loud burst of static. Outside the cockpit, distant stars rolled into view,

Ryder Windham

followed by the tendrils of a wide cloud of gas and dust. The *Harpy* had arrived at the edge of an interstellar nebula.

Gunn turned down the volume on the sensor scopes with one hand while she used the other to tap the flight controls, bringing the *Harpy* to what felt like a slow, hovering stop. Nuru realized he'd been gripping the rim of the control console, and he eased his grip as he gazed out the cockpit windows. Although the nebula dominated the view, he could see many distant stars as well as what appeared to be a nearby star. Despite his extensive study of astronomy at the Jedi Temple, which included memorizing stellar configurations, constellations, and nebulae from numerous vantage points throughout the galaxy, nothing outside the cockpit looked familiar.

Nuru said, "What star system is this?"

"Just gimme a sec, will ya?" Gunn replied as her hands danced over the controls, calling up a diagnostic readout as she glanced at a navigational scope. She cursed under her breath, then readjusted the scope and checked it again. "Well, the good news is we didn't suffer any damage."

Turning to face Gunn, Nuru said, "But where are we?"

"That's the bad news." Gunn made another adjustment to the scope. "I don't have the faintest clue, and the navi-computer doesn't recognize this sector, either. And just to top things off, radioactive interference is scrambling the sensors. The hyperspace compass is on the blink, too. We may be officially off the charts."

"But we must be somewhere on the route that the Chancellor provided. Right?"

"Don't make me repeat myself," Gunn said. "All I know for sure is how many hours we were in hyperspace, and that we're not back where we started, or any place we've been before."

Nuru glanced at the navigational scope, then said, "Can we do another emergency transposal to get us back to Chiss space?"

Gunn scowled. "If the last transposal failed to retrace our path, there's no tellin' where wind up if we try again!" She shook

STAR WARS: Curse of the Black Hole Pirates

her head. "This doesn't make sense. The transposal should have worked."

"You've done it before?"

"I've done most things before," Gunn said irritably. "But I've never fallen out of hyperspace at the wrong time!"

Nuru returned his gaze to the nebula, and realized the *Harpy* was drifting. A moment later, a dark void came into view at the edge of the nebula. Nuru's eyes grew wide. He said, "Maybe we didn't just fall out of hyperspace."

"What do you mean?"

"Maybe something pulled us out."

"Huh?" Gunn looked at Nuru. "What are you talkin' about?" She asked as she followed his gaze through the cockpit windows. Then she saw the dark void, too.

It was a black hole.

Chapter Six

“A black hole?” Sharp said to Nuru. “A real one?”

“No, a *fake* one, you lummox!” Gunn interrupted. “Of course, it's real! Are you sure your name isn't *Not-So-Sharp*?”

“Sorry,” Sharp said. Gesturing to the three other troopers in the *Hasty Harpy's* main cabin, he continued, “We learned about black holes during our training, but none of us has ever seen one before.”

Gunn rolled her eyes. “Far be it from me to spoil your holiday, boys,” she said, “but in case you didn't know-”

“Captain Gunn,” Nuru said.

“-a black hole isn't exactly a tourist attraction, or a place to go for-”

“Captain Gunn, *please!*” Nuru made a discreet gesture to the acceleration couch, where Veeren was seated. Cleaver stood beside Veeren, watching her. Veeren was staring at the deck. Nuru suspected she might be in a state of shock.

Nuru reached toward the wall and pressed a button. A panel slid back from the wall, revealing a viewscreen that displayed a periscopic view of the surrounding star system. Nuru adjusted the scope to bring the black hole to the center of the viewscreen. Shifting his gaze back to the troopers, he continued, “I believe this dark void is an intermediate-mass black hole. Obviously,

STAR WARS: Curse of the Black Hole Pirates

we're outside the radius, beyond the pull of its event horizon, or else the gravitational forces would have crushed us already. However, the hole's radiation seems to have rendered the *Harpy's* sensors useless. We can't determine our precise distance from the hole, or even measure its gravitational radiation. That's really all we know about our present position."

Breaker said, "Commander, do you think the black hole's gravity yanked us out of hyperspace?"

"It's certainly possible," Nuru said. "What's puzzling is that we were supposed to be on a transposal course, heading back the same route through hyperspace that delivered us to Chiss space. But if we're on the exact same route, we should have bypassed this sector without any difficulty."

"In other words," Gunn said as she moved beside Chatterbox, "it's highly likely that we left Chiss space on an altogether different hyperlane. Don't ask me how *that* could've happened, because I really don't know. Chatterbox entered the transposal commands correctly, just like I taught him."

Looking at Gunn and Chatterbox, Nuru said, "Right before we made the jump from Chiss space, we swerved to avoid hitting a droid starfighter. Did that cause us to enter the hyperspace portal at the wrong angle? I mean, would that have altered our Course?"

Gunn chuckled. "I don't know how much you know about navi-computers," she said, "but mine's a top-of-the-line Microaxial. We could've approached the portal from any angle and our approach vector would have been automatically corrected."

Nuru considered what Gunn had said, then responded, "Are you absolutely certain that we won't return to Chiss space if we try another transposal?"

Gunn shrugged. "We might return to the vicinity of the space station, or what's left of it. But given our proximity to a black hole in the Unknown Regions, and the fact that the navigational

Ryder Windham

sensors aren't working, we might wind up heading straight into the black hole instead. All bets are off.”

The group was silent for a moment as they contemplated their situation, then Knuckles said, “If we didn’t travel back the same way we came, is it possible we’re still in Chiss space?”

Nuru lifted his eyebrows. “Good question,” he commented. “But there's only one person on board who might know the answer.” He looked again at Veeren, and the others followed his gaze.

Veeren continued to stare at the deck.

“Aristocra,” Nuru said as he stepped toward the seated girl, “if you’ve been listening, then you're aware that in a very unexpected predicament. If you have any knowledge of black holes in Chiss space, or of a specific black hole within ten hours of travel through hyperspace from your—”

Nuru was interrupted by a noise like thunder at the same moment that the *Harpy* was struck by a violent shock wave. Everything that wasn’t bolted down within the cabin's interior went flying. Nuru fell toward Veeren, but stopped short when his chest met a length of metal. It was Cleaver's arm, which had lashed out to catch Nuru. Cleaver swung Nuru onto the couch beside Veeren, who held tight to her safety belt.

Gunn and the troopers had been knocked off their feet. The troopers rose fast, reaching for any surface area that provided a grip or traction. Gunn scrambled up from the deck and glanced at the viewscreen that Nuru had activated. On the viewscreen, bright lights streamed past and burst against the *Harpy's* shields.

Gunn shouted, “Chatterbox! Move it!” She darted into the passage tube that led to the cockpit. Chatterbox raced after her.

Another explosion. Another shock wave. The remaining troopers had braced themselves for the impact, but ducked as various bits of debris sailed and bounced across the cabin's interior. Cleaver clutched at the side of the couch while he adjusted his body to shield both Nuru and Veeren from the debris.

STAR WARS: Curse of the Black Hole Pirates

“Stay with the Aristocra!” Nuru shouted at Cleaver as he vaulted past the droid and into the passage tube. A third explosion launched Nuru against the tube's curved ceiling. Twisting his body as he returned to the deck, he landed on his feet and sprinted to the cockpit.

Moving up behind Gunn and Chatterbox, Nuru gazed past their shoulders and through the cockpit windows to see three starships hovering close to the *Harpy*. He immediately recognized two long, needle-like ships as old Vangaard Pathfinders, and was fairly certain that a saucer-shaped vessel was an Ugor salvage ship.

Three small starfighters whipped past the *Harpy's* cockpit. Nuru didn't recognize any of them, but the third passed so closely that he involuntarily flinched. Before he could comment, yet another ship, an armored frigate, came into view, moving ominously into position directly above the *Harpy*. Nuru guessed its length to be at least two hundred meters. The frigate resembled a massive hammer attached to an assortment of thrusters, and it moved at a sidelong angle, displaying its portside hull. The hull was blistered with turbolaser emplacements and quad batteries, and all were aimed at the *Harpy*.

Nuru said, “Pirates.”

“Ya think?” Gunn said. “I wonder if they speak Basic.”

Four more starfighters swooped past the cockpit. Nuru leaned past Gunn and looked at the scopes. From what he could see, the *Harpy's* sensors were still only picking up static signals, but a moment later, the commo board sounded with a general override broadcast. “Attention, Corellian transport!” a deep voice erupted from the comm. “Shut down your engines, lock all systems except commo, and prepare to be boarded.”

Gunn muttered, “They *do* speak Basic.”

“If you are carrying blasters,” the deep voice continued, “leave them in your cockpit. If you attempt to escape, we will open fire.”

Ryder Windham

“Stang!” Gunn cursed as she brought her fist down on the edge of the commo board. “I’m getting pretty sick of people telling me to shut down my weapons!”

Nuru craned his neck back to look at the freighter overhead. “With all the firepower they have trained on us, and our lack of navigational sensors, I don’t think we have much choice.”

Gunn cursed again as she shut down energy to the *Harpy*’s laser cannon. Nuru’s mind began racing, trying to think of a way to protect Veeren and everyone else on board. Looking at Gunn, he said, “You’ve dealt with pirates before?”

Gunn chuckled. “Hasn’t everyone?”

“Can you think of any way to keep them off the *Harpy*?”

“No,” Gunn said truthfully, “but I might be able to stall them.”

“Then do it!”

Without hesitation, Gunn pressed a button on the commo board. Adopting a nervous tone, she replied, “Oh, thank goodness you answered our distress signal! Do you have a tech droid who can fix a reactor leak and a-”

Gunn interrupted herself by pressing a switch to break the connection. “That ruse should buy us a few minutes,” she said as she leaned away from the commo. “If they think the ship is contaminated, they’ll send over a droid or some other loser first.” She reached down to remove the compact blaster pistol that she kept in her right boot, got up, and placed the pistol on her seat. “Let them find at least one blaster, and they won’t look too hard for others.”

Nuru said, “I’m not leaving my lightsabers,”

“I didn’t expect you would,” Gunn said. “C’mon, you two.” She moved past Chatterbox and Nuru, heading into the passage tube.

“We can’t let them take the Aristocra,” Nuru said as he followed Chatterbox and Gunn to the main Cabin. “Is there any place she can be concealed?”

“Nowhere they wouldn’t find her eventually,” Gunn said.

STAR WARS: Curse of the Black Hole Pirates

They entered the main cabin, and found Breaker, Sharp, and Knuckles fully suited in their armor, holding their blaster weapons ready. Cleaver stood beside Veeren, who remained seated and wore a stern expression as she looked at the cabin's viewscreen, on which the enemy ships were visible. Breaker said, "What's the situation, Commander?"

"We're surrounded by pirates," Nuru said. "At least four ships and seven starfighters. They've demanded that we surrender our weapons and prepare to be boarded. If I can talk with their leader, I might be able to negotiate for the safety of--"

"Negotiate?!" Gunn said. "With pirates? Forget that!"

Nuru asked, "What do you suggest, Captain Gunn?"

Gunn surveyed everyone in the cabin. "I know a thing or two about how pirates think," she said. "If we're all going to survive, the pirates have to believe each one of us is uniquely valuable, and not in any way expendable. But under no circumstances can they learn that Nuru is a Jedi."

"Why?" said Sharp.

Gunn scowled at Sharp. "Because pirates don't like Jedi, and our goal is to stay alive. Better to pretend we're willing to be friendly with them than try to defy them, at least at first. We just need to stick together. Unfortunately, there's one person on board that I'm not sure I can count on." Then she turned to Veeren and added, "You listening to me, little lady?"

Veeren lifted her gaze to Gunn, but remained silent.

"You're smart to keep your mouth shut," Gunn said. "Because if you think your 'I'm the Aristocra' routine will cut you any slack with pirates, you may as well jump out of the airlock right now. And if you do *anything* to endanger the rest of us, I will shove you out personally. Got that?"

Veeren swallowed hard, then said, "What do you want me to do?"

"Whatever I say." Gunn turned abruptly to face Nuru and the troopers. "The pirates will be here any moment. I'm certain

Ryder Windham

they'll transfer us to one of their ships. Give all your weapons to Cleaver. Now!"

"But, Gunn," Nuru said. "I can't let anyone else have my lightsabers. It would be ... irresponsible."

"Then you'd better do a really good job of looking like you're unarmed, kid."

The troopers handed their weapons to Cleaver. Gunn quickly issued additional instructions to everyone. When Gunn was done, Breaker sounded skeptical as he said, "Do you really think that will work, Captain Gunn?"

"We don't have time for another plan."

"On second thought," Nuru said as he handed Ring-Sol Ambase's lightsaber to Cleaver, "perhaps you'd better hold onto this one."

Less than six minutes after Gunn had given brisk instructions to everyone on the *Harpy*, one of the two Vangaard Pathfinders latched onto the *Harpy's* starboard docking port with a loud clang. A moment later, the port's hatch hissed open, and a short, fishlike alien boarded the captured transport.

The alien's name was Robonino. He was a Patrolian, a bipedal amphibian with mottled mauve scales. He once had two bulbous red eyes, but a dark patch covered the ruined socket formerly occupied by his left. Wide fins projected from either side of his laterally compressed head, and two arms extended from his sleeveless spacesuit. His arms resembled cumbersome, vestigial wings with knobby-jointed fingers. He clutched a scanning device in one hand and a blaster in the other. A pack of equipment was slung across his back, and he moved with a shambling stride that suggested his legs had never entirely adapted to walking.

Robonino's right eye surveyed the passage tube, then looked to the small monitor on his handheld scanner.

Another alien, a tall, broad-shouldered humanoid reptilian, moved up behind him. Before Robonino could announce that his

STAR WARS: Curse of the Black Hole Pirates

scanner had not detected any radiation leaks, the reptilian shoved him aside and snarled, “Outta my way, fish-head!”

The reptilian was a Trandoshan named Bossk. Clad in an ill-fitting yellow spacesuit, his bulky forearms jutted out from sleeves that were too short and too tight. His leggings ended just below his knees, exposing his thick-skinned legs and bare feet that ended in clawed toes. His long-barreled blaster rifle looked almost ridiculous in the clutches of his massive, clawed hands, which looked as if they would sooner break the weapon in half than fire it with any accuracy.

Bossk’s wide nostrils flared. “There’s no reactor leak on this junkheap! I only smell stinkin’ humans!”

He moved forward without grace or stealth, his heavy feet clumping loudly through the passage tube. Robonino held both his scanner and blaster in front of him as he followed Bossk into the transport’s main cabin.

The two aliens found Lalo Gunn standing in front of the cabin’s acceleration couch. Her arms were raised with her palms exposed and fingers extended to show that she wasn’t holding any weapons. Behind her, Nuru and Veeren were seated side by side on the couch. Both wore dark, grease-stained coveralls with blue blankets wrapped around their upper bodies. The coveralls and cape-like blankets had been the most immediately available things that Gunn could find for disguises. Nuru’s had deep pockets, one of which concealed his lightsaber.

Bossk growled through his fanged maw, then repeated, “There’s no reactor leak!”

“I fixed it.” Gunn said. “And I left my blaster in the cockpit.”

Without looking at Robonino, Bossk said, “Check it out.” As Robonino sauntered off into the passage tube that led from the main cabin to the cockpit, Nuru realized that he had been holding his breath. He exhaled quietly. Nuru was worried about what would happen if the pirates found Cleaver, who — at Gunn’s instruction — had hidden himself along with most of the Breakout Squad’s weapons in the *Harpy’s* engine room.

Ryder Windham

Facing Gunn, Bossk blinked his eyes and said, "So, you fixed the leak, huh?"

"That's right," Gunn said. "Right after I sent the distress signal!"

Bossk blinked again as he cocked his head. He appeared to be weighing information within the narrow confines of his thick skull. Nuru remained relatively calm as he watched the Trandoshan, but he sensed Veeren go tense beside him.

"Distress signal?" Bossk snapped. "I didn't hear any signal!"

"I was hired to bring these two kids to their family," Gunn said, and began to gesture with her left hand to the seated figures.

Bossk reacted with surprising speed. Shifting his blaster rifle to his right hand as he moved forward, he grabbed Gunn's wrist with his left and spun her around, wrenching her arm up behind her back and turning her body so that they both faced the two Chiss on the couch. Adjusting his grip on his rifle, Bossk tilted its barrel toward Gunn's head as he looked from Nuru to Veeren. He let out a low hiss, then said, "I wonder what blue kids taste like."

"Before you chow down," Gunn said coolly, "you should know they're worth more alive. A *lot* more. Their parents are loaded." She looked at the rifle's barrel as if it were a minor annoyance.

Gunn had told Nuru and Veeren to pretend to be brother and sister, members of a wealthy family. She had also told Nuru not to reveal himself as a Jedi unless absolutely necessary. Nuru sensed that Gunn was nervous, and admired her for not showing it. Because of his Jedi training, he was not at all frightened by the menacing Trandoshan. He knew more than a dozen different ways to disarm and disable the fiend without even getting up from the couch. Despite his own confidence, he felt sorry for Veeren, who had begun to tremble.

Veeren's obvious fear did not escape Bossk. Keeping his hold on Gunn, he leaned closer to the Chiss girl and said, "Think you're worth more alive? Haw! *Nothing* beats a free lunch!"

STAR WARS: Curse of the Black Hole Pirates

Just then, Robonino reentered the cabin, carrying Gunn's blaster in one of his pockets. The Patrolian stepped over beside Bossk and held up the scanner so the Trandoshan could see it.

Bossk glanced at the scanner's small monitor, then his eyes flicked to Gunn's face. He said, "How many life forms on board?" Before Gunn could reply, he pressed the tip of his blaster against her jaw, then added, "And if you tell me any number different than four, you're dead."

Gunn said, "Do you mean how many *more* life forms on board?"

Confused, Bossk said, "Huh?"

"You asked, 'How many life forms on board?' But I don't know if you want me to include myself, the two kids, you, and your friend."

"I asked you how many *more* life forms are on board!" Bossk sputtered defiantly. "And fish-head's not my friend!"

Hearing this, Robonino's fins flared out on both sides of his head, and his good eye twitched as he glanced at Bossk. Robonino took a cautious step away from the belligerent Trandoshan.

"My mistake," Gunn said. "But you already told me the number."

"Huh?" Bossk said again.

"You discouraged me from saying any number other than *four*," Gunn replied. "And you're right. There're *four* more life forms."

"I *know* that!" Bossk sputtered. "I *asked* you to tell me where they are!"

Nuru sensed the Trandoshan had reached a boiling point, and hoped that Gunn would not attempt to correct the dimwitted brute. He shifted slightly on his seat, moving his hand beneath the blue blanket that fell over his lap until his fingertips brushed against the side of his lightsaber. He no longer cared about sticking to Gunn's plan. If he had to reveal himself as a Jedi to save Gunn, he would.

Ryder Windham

But Gunn stayed remarkably calm. Ignoring the pressure of the blaster rifle's barrel against her jaw, she tilted her chin slightly in the direction of a nearby hatch and said, "The other passengers are in the secondary hold."

"I know where they are!" Bossk said. "Fishhead's scanner showed me. So now, you open the hold, and no funny stuff!" He jerked Gunn around. Bracing her like a shield in front of him, Bossk guided her toward the hatch while Robonino readied his own blaster.

As they moved closer to the hatch, Gunn said, "There are two things you should know about the four passengers in the hold."

"What's that?" Bossk said.

"First, they're unarmed Republic clone troopers. I've got them contained in a force field."

Bossk snorted. "You putting me on?"

"No," Gunn said as she palmed the hatch's opening mechanism. The hatch slid back, and Bossk gazed over Gunn's shoulder to see four armored troopers standing upright, lined up with their backs against a plastoid bulkhead.

Even though Gunn had mentioned the force field, Bossk failed to notice the sheet of pale blue light that stretched from deck to ceiling within the hold, separating him from the four motionless troopers. He reacted automatically, and typically without thinking, by rapidly swinging his blaster rifle away from Gunn's jaw so that its long barrel now rested on her shoulder. Holding Gunn like a shield and now using her shoulder like sniper saddle, he squeezes off five powerful shots at the troopers.

The rifle's noise was almost deafening inside the *Harpy*, and each shot caused Veeren to flinch. The fired bolts exploded into bright bursts as the energy field absorbed their impact, while all four troopers remained perfectly still. Bossk was about to fire more rounds when Gunn shouted, "Force field! They're behind a force field!"

Bossk noticed the four troopers had not budged from their position against the bulkhead. "I *know* they're behind a force

STAR WARS: Curse of the Black Hole Pirates

field!” he snarled. “I just wanted to make sure the field was working!”

Behind Bossk, Robonino nearly laughed out loud at the Trandoshan’s ridiculous excuse. Unable to contain himself, the little Patrolian released what sounded like a gurgling cough.

Bossk held tight to Gunn as he swiftly twisted his neck to look at Robonino, who quickly pretended he was only clearing, his throat. Bossk said, “The other pirates didn’t believe me when I told them about the clones. If this ain’t proof, I don’t know what is!”

While Nuru wondered what the Trandoshan had said about the clones, the Patrolian reached to his own belt to activate a comm, signaling his allies that the transport secured. A moment later, footsteps sounded as more pirates boarded the *Harpy*.

Nuru and Veeren sat still and silent as a dozen life-forms from as many worlds shuffled, lumbered, slinked, and slithered into and through the main cabin. The pirates included a long-tusked Pacithhip who walked on robotic stilts, a female Arcona in a dark green pressure suit, and a Sullustan with a tattooed head. The largest pirate was a hulking Swokes Swokes, who had had to crouch-walk to avoid bumping his bulbous, sharp-horned head against the ceiling. Nuru wondered if any of the pirates knew how to return in Republic space.

Still in the Trandoshan’s clutches, Gunn sized up the Swokes Swokes as he passed her. The Swokes lidless eyes barely glanced at Gunn before he ducked into a passage tube that led to the *Harpy’s* freight elevator.

The Arcona looked at the occupants in the cabin and loudly announced, “This ship is now the property of the Black Hole Pirates!”

Gunn did not enjoy hearing this, but resisted her urge to give the Arcona a dirty look. The Arcona turned her anvil-shaped head to face Nuru and Veeren. Nuru immediately noticed the Arcona’s eyes looked like glittering gold.

Ryder Windham

“Sit tight, kids,” said the Arcona. “We’re all going for little ride. And if you behave, there may be a place for you among us.”

The docked Vangaard Pathfinder's engine fired, and then the Pathfinder began tugging the *Harpy* to the frigate. Robonino returned to the *Harpy's* main cabin, and then he and the Arcona headed off to the engine room. Watching their departure, Nuru grimaced. All he could do was hope that Cleaver could avoid detection. Gunn’s plan depended on it.

There was a loud *thunk* from outside the *Harpy* as the pathfinder delivered both ships alongside the immense frigate. The Trandoshan finally released his grip on Gunn, and he shoved her back toward Nuru and Veeren. Gunn stumbled but recovered her balance quickly, and spun fast so she could keep her on the reptilian lout.

Bossk aimed a thumb at the open hold and said, “How come the clones are just standing there like that?”

“Before you started shooting,” Gunn said through clenched teeth, “I was about to tell you the *second* thing about those troopers.”

“So tell me already!” Bossk snapped.

Without batting an eye, Gunn said, “They’re defective.”

Chapter Seven

“Defective?” Bossk said. “What do you mean, the clones are defective?”

“It's kind of complicated,” Gunn replied. “It might be best if I talked with your leader.”

“As far as you're concerned,” Bossk said, “*I'm* in charge around here. Now answer me! Defective *hon?*”

Just then, Gunn noticed the Swokes Swokes as he reentered the *Harpy's* main cabin. Facing Bossk, Gunn said, “You watch your mouth, buster! I'll have you know that some of my best friends happen to be Swokes Swokes!”

Overhearing this, the surprised Swokes Swokes stopped and looked at the female human beside Bossk. Bossk was baffled by Gunn's outburst and said. “Huh?”

“You heard me!” Gunn said. “I don't know what you have against Swokes Swokes, and I don't care! Swokes Swokes are highly intelligent, so don't you say otherwise!” And then she pretended to notice the Swokes Swokes for the first time. Speaking in the Swokes Swokes native language, Swoken, she said, “Finally, a friendly face!”

Across the cabin, Veeren whispered to Nuru, “What did she say?”

“I don't know,” Nuru whispered back.

Ryder Windham

The Swokes Swokes twisted his fleshy neck to look at the passage tube behind him. He saw no one in the tube. Turning back to face Gunn, he pointed a thick, clawed finger at himself as he replied in Swoken, “Me?”

Bossk watched in astonishment as Gunn reached out to take the Swokes Swokes' monstrous hand in her own relatively delicate grasp. “I’m Lalo Gunn,” she said in Basic. “I’m captain of this ship, or was at least until a few minutes ago. I’m so relieved you found me and my passengers out here. Are you the leader of these privateers?”

Bossk looked from the Swokes Swokes to Gunn and said, “You think *he’s* the leader?!”

The Swokes Swokes ignored Bossk, and his gaping maw pulled back into a wide smile that revealed long, uneven fangs. “I’m not the leader,” the Swokes Swokes said. “I’m Mokshok, first mate to Cap’n Mcgrrrr.”

In Swoken, Gunn said, “A pleasure to meet you, Mokshok.”

“Hey!” Bossk snarled at Gunn. “Enough gibberish! I was talkin’ to you!”

“Mokshok,” Gunn continued in Swoken, “I’d like to talk with you and your leader about how we might work together.” Giving a dismissive glance to Bossk, she added, “Maybe we could talk in private?”

“Hey!” Bossk roared so loudly that Veeren flinched beside Nuru. “I’m in charge here!”

Mokshok said, “Take a walk, Bossk.”

Bossk glared at Mokshok and snarled, “You don’t give me orders, you big-”

Mokshok launched a meaty fist into Bossk’s face. The Swokes Swokes's knuckles carried Bossk’s head straight into the cabin’s wall, which it struck with a sickening thud. Mokshok disconnected his knuckles from Bossk's face, and then the Trandosha's knees buckled under him and he flopped to the deck.

STAR WARS: Curse of the Black Hole Pirates

From across the cabin, Nuru sensed that the blow to the head had not killed the Trandoshan, but had merely knocked him out cold. Although he did not know what Gunn had said to the Swokes Swokes, he was fairly certain she had goaded them into Fighting each other.

Mokshok beckoned to two other pirates and said, "Take Bossk hack to the pathfinder and dump him in the infirmary."

As the two pirates carried the Trandoshan out of the *Harpy*, Gunn glanced at the wall, where the impact of the Trandoshan's head had left a deep dent. Returning her attention to the Swokes Swokes, she smiled and said, "Thanks, Mokshok. I don't know why that fellow said such unkind things about you."

"Bossk is a jerk," Mokshok said. "He only arrived in this sector a few days ago, but I've been just itching to punch his clock. Kept on bragging about what a big-time bounty hunter he was, and babbling about the Republic having an army of clones. You ever hear such nonsense?"

Both Gunn and Nuru realized that the pirates must have been operating in a very isolated region of space if they had never heard of the Clone Wars until Bossk's recent arrival. Gunn replied, "I can't tell you about Bossk's experience as a bounty hunter, but he was right about the clones. I happen to be transporting four of them. They're harmless now, completely immobilized." She gestured to the open hatch.

Mokshok stepped over to the hold so he could view the motionless troopers. He said, "Those armored suits ... have people in 'em?"

"Yup," Gunn said.

"Mcgrrrr will want to have a look at these guys."

"You said Mcgrrrr is your captain?"

"That's right," Mokshok replied. "You'll meet him soon enough." Returning his gaze to Gunn, he smiled as he asked, "Where'd you learn to speak Swoken?"

"A friend from Makem Te."

Ryder Windham

Hearing the name of his homeworld, Mokshok sighed. "What I wouldn't give to see Makem Te again."

"What's stopping you?"

Mokshok was about to respond when a male human entered the cabin. Clad in a broad, shaggy vest that made him resemble a furry creature, the man also wore a darkly mottled tunic, baggy trousers, and well-worn boots made of exotic leather. His face looked heavy but strong, marked by few wrinkles except for the creases at the edges of his twinkling blue eyes, which were so incredibly pale, they resembled ice. A mop of grizzled hair fell across his forehead, and silver whiskers bristled from his cheeks. Nuru could only guess the man's age as anywhere between thirty-five and sixty years.

Clicking his heels together, the man smiled at Gunn, gave a slight bow, and said, "I am Hethra Mcgrrrr, captain of the *Random Mallet*, and leader of the Black Hole Pirates."

"Lalo Gunn," Gunn said with a polite nod. "Captain of the *Hasty Harpy*, and I'd like it to stay that way."

"But of course you would!" Mcgrrrr replied brightly. Without offering any hint at his intentions, he looked around the cabin and said, "I haven't seen a Corellian YT-I760 transport in a long, long time." His piercing gaze fell upon Nuru and Veeren. "Crew or passengers?"

"Definitely not crew," Gunn said. "Just a couple of rich kids I was taking back to their family. I'm also transporting four Republic clone troopers to a reconditioning center."

Mcgrrrr raised one eyebrow. "Clone troopers?" Turning his gaze to Mokshok, he said, "That new fellow - the Trandoshan - was telling the truth? The Republic is at war?"

"See for yourself, Cap'n," Mokshok said, gesturing to the open hold.

Mcgrrrr stepped over to the hold and peered into it. Looking at the troopers who remained motionless behind the force field, he said, "They're alive?"

"Yes," Gunn said.

STAR WARS: Curse of the Black Hole Pirates

“What do they look like under those helmets?”

“Like very tough men. The problem with these tough guys is they're defective, which was why I was bringing them to a reconditioning center.”

“What's wrong with them?”

“From what I was told, ‘wrong’ is a matter of opinion. I’d be happy to tell you about them, but my first concern is the safety of my passengers.”

Mcgrrrr grinned. “You're proposing some kind of bargain?”

“I would be, if I were in any position to bargain.”

This answer seemed to please Mcgrrrr. He clapped Mokshok on the arm and said, “As my first mate as my witness, I declare that no member of the Black Hole Pirates shall bring harm to your young charges.”

“That's only slightly reassuring,” Gunn said, “given that a rather large Trandoshan was threatening me with a blaster rifle just a moment ago.”

Mcgrrrr sighed. “Ah, that Bossk. I suppose it’s my fault for even allowing him the choice of joining our ranks after he and Robonino arrived in a brokendown spaceship a few days ago. But let's not dwell on the past. We're all friends now, right?”

“Maybe,” Gunn said. “Friends help each other, and I could use some help. I didn't expect to exit hyperspace here, and could use some coordinates to help me return to Republic space.”

Mcgrrrr grinned again, then said, “We can talk about how we might help each other *after* you tell me about these clones.”

“All right,” Gunn said. “You see, clone troopers are engineered to obey their commanding officers and Jedi generals, but they—”

“Jedi commanders?!” Mcgrrrr raised both eyebrows. “The Trandoshan didn’t mention that! Do the clones have powers like the Jedi?”

Gunn was surprised by the question, as was Nuru, who thought Mcgrrrr sounded genuinely eager to know whether the troopers were Force-sensitive. Gunn shook her head, then

Ryder Windham

replied, "They're strong and resilient, perfect soldiers. But no, they don't have special powers."

Mcgrrrr looked at Mokshok, and Gunn saw that they were sharing some silent communication, the kind exchanged by people who have worked together for many years. Mcgrrrr frowned, then said, "Sorry, Captain Gunn, I interrupted you. I believe you were about to tell me how these perfect soldiers aren't quite perfect."

Gunn said, "Yes, well, the clones are engineered to be obedient to their commanders. The problem with *these* clones is that they'll obey anyone."

"Anyone?"

Gunn nodded.

"Without hesitation?"

"They aren't the thoughtful types," Gunn said. "You give them a command, they'll do it. They're unarmed, totally harmless ... well, unless they're told to do something that might bring harm."

Mcgrrrr looked again at Mokshok and said, "I don't know about you, Mokshok, but I'd like to see a demonstration."

"Really?" Gunn said, as if it had never occurred to her that the pirates would be interested in the troopers. "I could deactivate the force field, and—"

Mcgrrrr and Mokshok pulled their blasters out and casually aimed them at the open hatch. Gunn was surprised by the sudden appearance of the weapons.

Gunn said, "I thought we were friends."

"*We* are," Mcgrrrr said. "But I'm reserving judgment on the armored boys. Switch off the force field, but do it carefully."

"Sure," Gunn said. Keeping her eyes on the two pirates, she backed into the hold and palmed a switch on the wall. The force field vanished with a static buzz. Breaker, Knuckles, Sharp, and Chatterbox did not budge from their stance. She tapped Breaker on the shoulder and said, "Trooper One! Sit down."

STAR WARS: Curse of the Black Hole Pirates

Breaker dropped to the deck and crouched against the bulkhead.

Gunn rapped a finger against Knuckles's helmet and said, "Trooper Two! Stand on your head."

Knuckles bent at the waist, placed his gloved hands and helmeted head against the deck, and then kicked his legs up so that the bottoms of his boots were aimed at the ceiling.

Moving past the inverted Knuckles, Gunn tapped Sharp's shoulder and said, "Trooper Three! Jog in place."

Sharp began jogging in place. Gunn turned to face the pirates who remained outside the hatch and said, "He won't stop until someone tells him to or his legs fall off, whichever comes first."

While Sharp continued jogging, Gunn tapped Chatterbox's chest plate and said, "Trooper Four! Remove your helmet and hold it by your side!"

Chatterbox took off his helmet, revealing his swarthy features to the pirates. Gunn smiled at him and said, "Trooper Four! Say, 'Captain Gunn is the love of my life.'"

"Captain Gunn," Chatterbox said in a gravely tone, "is the love of your life."

Hearing this, Mcgrrrr and Mokshok responded with loud laughter.

Gunn threw a playful jab at Chatterbox's side and said, "You messed up, Trooper Four!"

"I think he was close enough," Mcgrrrr said. Without warning, he said, "Troopers One and Two! On your feet!"

Breaker sprang up from the deck at the same time that Knuckles lowered his legs to right himself, so the two troopers were now standing side by side.

"Trooper Three!" Mcgrrrr said. "Stop jogging!"

Sharp came to a sudden halt.

"Troopers One, Two, and Three! Remove your helmets!"

Breaker, Knuckles, and Sharp obediently took off their helmets, revealing that they were identical to the already

Ryder Windham

unmasked Chatterbox. All four troopers wore blank expressions as they gazed at the two pirates.

"Impressive workmanship," Mcgrrrr said. "Were they engineered and replicated from scratch, or did the cloners use a template?"

"Template," Gunn replied as she moved away from Chatterbox, stepping through the open hatch to stand beside Mcgrrrr and Mokshok in the main cabin. "A bounty hunter. Jango Fett. Ever heard of him?"

"No," Mcgrrrr said.

Mokshok said, "They don't look so tough."

Gunn said, "You should have seen them when I picked them up at the military depot. They had more room to move around. They can do lots of tricks."

Mokshok glanced at Mcgrrrr and said, "The crew could use some entertainment, Cap'n."

Mcgrrrr nodded, then looked at Gunn. "Captain Gunn, like to hear more about the war in Republic space. I invite you and your passengers to be honored guests on the *Random Mallet*."

"That's very hospitable of you, Captain Mcgrrrr," Gunn said warily. Gesturing to Nuru and Veeren, she added, "But these kids *do* need to get home sooner than later."

Mcgrrrr chuckled. "Oh, I think you should definitely plan on later."

"May I ask why?"

"Because I don't expect any of you will ever leave this sector."

Hearing this, Veeren gasped. She stood up fast, leaving Nuru on the acceleration couch, and said, "I am Aristocra of the Second Ruling Family of the Chiss Ascendancy, and you will return me to Chiss space immediately." Her words tumbled out rapidly, as if their sudden release would somehow protect her that much faster. Nuru did not need any Force powers to know that Veeren was very, very scared.

Nuru glanced at Gunn, and saw her brow furrow. Gunn had been very clear when she'd instructed Veeren to avoid

STAR WARS: Curse of the Black Hole Pirates

conversation with the pirates. Gunn stifled her anger, but stared hard at the Chiss girl as she said, "Hush, Veeren, and let the grown-ups talk."

Mcgrrrr smiled gently at Veeren and said, "It's kind of you to share that information, my dear girl. But even if I understood your prattle about a ruling family, or if you happened to be carrying an enormous sum of credits, I'm afraid it wouldn't help you now."

Mokshok looked at the two Chiss and said, "It's not our fault. No one can leave this sector, including us." Turning to Gunn, he added, "That's why I'll never see Makem Te again."

"I don't get it," Gunn said. "Your ships have hyperdrives, right?"

"Of Course," Mcgrrrr replied.

"So what's stopping you from leaving?"

"See there?" Mcgrrrr said, pointing to the cabin's viewscreen, which still displayed the *Harpy's* scopeview of the black hole. "The fact of the matter is ... we're cursed."

"Mcgrrrr and Mokshok are taking the passengers to the *Random Mallet*," said the Arcona to the stiltwalking Pacithhip. The Arcona had just entered the *Hasty Harpy's* engine room, where the Pacithhip was inspecting the mechanical and technological systems. Peering past the Pacithhip's shoulder, the Arcona said, "Ever seen a hyperdrive like that?"

The Pacithhip shook his head slightly, careful not to let his tusks strike any nearby machinery. "This is a custom job," he replied. "Some parts I don't recognize because they're new, less than ten years old. But that's an lsu-Sim motivator hooked up to what looks like a hybrid Avatar-10 and MT-5 drive, maybe a prototype. And see those regulators and power converters? They're hand-tooled. They'd have to be, or else none of these incompatible bits would work right. This transport isn't just a hot rod. It's what the mechanics at Fondor used to call a Hutt's Folly."

Ryder Windham

“Meaning what?”

“Meaning that whoever paid for all this may have had more money than sense.”

“Maybe these components weren't paid for,” the Arcona said. “Maybe they were stolen.”

“Either way, doesn't really matter,” the Pacithhip replied. “This could be one of the most powerful hyperdrives in the galaxy, but it wouldn't do us any good.” The Pacirhhip sighed. “Mcgrrrr might want to have a look at this unit before we start tearing it up for recycling. Come on, let's go.”

The Pacithhip led the Arcona out of the engine room. Neither noticed the gray-metal droid who had neatly folded his body between the hyperdrive motivator and power converters.

Cleaver unfolded and rose to his feet. He carried a pilfered E-5 blaster rifle across his back and a shockstick at his side. Edging around the reinforced engine mount, he reached behind a heat shield to recover the cargo sack that he had placed there earlier. The sack held four blaster rifles, four pistols, assorted grenades, and a single lightsaber. He picked up the sack, then stepped toward the engine room's hatch and listened carefully.

His auditory sensors detected at least three pirates still on the *Harpy*. One pirate was just outside the engine room, making tapping noises at an engineering console. While the pirate tapped away, Cleaver considered his next move.

Lalo Gunn had been certain that the *Harpy*'s passengers would be transferred to one of the pirate ships, and she had been correct. But before the pirates had boarded the *Harpy*, she had only had time to tell Cleaver to hide with the weapons in the engine room, then do everything he could to follow Nuru and the troopers and deliver the weapons to them within thirty minutes. Her final command — “And don't get caught!” — had hardly been necessary.

Cleaver waited inside the engine room's hatch, listening to the pirates while he contemplated his mission. Inside the cold confines of his refurbished droid brain, his cogitative processors

STAR WARS: Curse of the Black Hole Pirates

generated a possible concern. None of the members of the Breakout Squad had mentioned whether he should avoid killing any pirates.

Taking the sack filled with weapons with him, Cleaver stepped out of the engine room and saw the pirate who stood before the engineering console. The pirate was the short Patrolian, Robonino. Seeing the droid out of the corner of his bulbous right eye, Robonino's facial fins flared out as he moved fast for his blaster.

Cleaver moved faster.

Chapter Eight

“We arrived in this sector the same way you did,” Hethra Mcgrrrr said to his guests as he settled down into his seat. “We were on our way elsewhere — in our case, to the Delphon system — when our frigate fell out of hyperspace early and without warning. That was just over ten years ago. Back then, we were known as the Mcgrrrr Gang, which I still think has a certain ring to it.

“We immediately discovered that our hyperdrives no longer worked. At first, we thought we had technical problems. But eventually, we came to understand that it was the black hole that caused our plight. The hole not only wrenched us from hyperspace, but radiates gravitational waves that affect the curvature of spacetime itself, playing havoc on our navi-computers. Even worse, it emits a possibly unique radiation that effectively nullifies hyperdrive technology. Though we can travel at sublight speeds, it would take several lifetimes to escape the forces that bind us here.

“Unable to reach lightspeed, we’ve been mired in this nameless sector for more than a decade now, reduced to preying upon whatever odd vessel tumbles into our midst. For example, the heap that delivered Bossk and Robonino a few days back has already been scavenged to repair other ships. And though our

STAR WARS: Curse of the Black Hole Pirates

fleet has grown and we've gained a new name, we will forever remain trapped here, where money has no value. And *that*," he said with finality, "is the curse of the Black Hole Pirates."

"Did you just say something?" Lalo Gunn shouted over the surrounding noise as she turned to face Mcgrrrr, "Were you talking to me?"

Mcgrrrr chuckled in response. "No, Captain Gunn. I was just yacking my head off."

Gunn, Mcgrrrr, Nuru, and Veeren were seated at the captain's table in the banquet hall on the *Random Mallet*, the pirates' hammer-shaped frigate. The captain's table was near an enormous, circular window that offered a sweeping view of the black hole. Neighboring tables had been pushed aside to make room for the four Republic troopers, who were obeying every command from the dozens of boisterous pirates who encircled them.

The noise level made it almost impossible for anyone to carry on a conversation.

"Trooper Two! Jump up and down!"

"Look at him go! Hey, Trooper One! Walk on your hands!"

"That's nothing! Watch this! Trooper Three! Lift that crate!"

"Trooper Four! Stop jumping!"

"No, you fool! It's Trooper *Two* that's jumping! Four's the one climbing the wall."

"Trooper Four! Do a backflip off the wall and land on table!"

"Haw! He did it! Trooper Four, now do-"

"Shut yer yap! It's my turn to boss one around!"

"Trooper One! Over here!"

Nuru had been able to hear Mcgrrrr's tale, and had listened attentively. Nuru noticed Mcgrrrr was grinning, and had the distinct impression that the pirate's leader enjoyed watching his crew having fun. Then Nuru glanced at Veeren, who sat to his left, staring sullenly at the food that had been placed in front of her.

Ryder Windham

Nuru returned his attention to Mcgrrrr, who gave him a conspiratorial wink. Mcgrrrr leaned closer to him and said, "You and your sister ever think about becoming pirates, lad? Because if you have, today's your lucky day."

Nuru grinned sheepishly, as if the possibility intrigued him. "I can't say I've ever considered it, sir," he replied. "I ... That is ..." He gestured to Veeren, then continued, "Our parents expect us to become diplomats."

"Diplomats?" Mcgrrrr slapped the table. "What an amazing coincidence! My first mate, Mokshok, used to be a diplomat. He was an ambassador of Makem Te. From what I've heard, he was a good one, too, not that he enjoyed it very much. Endless conferences and private meetings. Too many customs to remember. Always having to dress properly. But look at him now!"

Nuru followed Mcgrrrr's gaze to see Mokshok howling with laughter among the other pirates who had gathered at the center of the banquet room. The pirates were singing and clapping their hands while the troopers performed the latest request, a highkicking dance.

"Even with a black hole as a captor," Mcgrrrr said, "a pirate's life is a merry one. A life to be envied. What do you say, lad?"

"They all certainly appear to be happy and healthy," Nuru replied. "But when you mentioned that you prey on 'odd vessels' that fall out of hyperspace, I couldn't help wondering ... Does *everyone* that you capture agree to join your gang?"

"I'm proud to say only two arrivals refused to enlist. A pair of Sullustans with strong feelings against pirates."

Nuru felt a sense of dread as he asked, "What happened to them?"

"We took them all to a small world not far from here. Helped them set up their own little camp, we did. Despite their aversions to piracy, they still manage to serve us in their own way. Raising crops, preparing provisions, helping with ship maintenance and whatnot. After all, they need *something* to keep them occupied."

STAR WARS: Curse of the Black Hole Pirates

“And what do they get in return?”

Mcgrrrr took a sip from a large goblet, then replied, “For one thing, they get to live, lad. They also get to do research on an ancient—”

“Who hit me?!” bellowed a voice so loud that the singing pirates ended their song and turned to see the speaker. It was Bossk.

The Trandoshan stood in the room’s main hatch. He had one hand pressed against the side of his head and his other hand gripped his blaster rifle. Bossk glowered at the pirates, but then noticed the four armored Republic troopers who had their arms linked around one another’s shoulders and were kicking their legs up in what seemed to be some kind of dance. Temporarily forgetting his aching head. Bossk growled, “What in blazes is going on?”

“A party, Bossk,” Mcgrrrr replied. “We’re welcoming some new additions to our ranks.” Gesturing to an empty seat beside Gunn, Mcgrrrr added, “Won’t you join us for a drink?”

“I wanna know who hit me!” Bossk said. “And why are those clones dancing?!”

“Because no one told them to stop,” Mokshok replied as he stepped away from the other pirates so Bossk could see him. Keeping his lidless eyes on Bossk, Mokshok said, “Troopers One, Two, Three, and Four! Stop dancing and stand at attention!”

The troopers immediately drew their arms away from one another’s shoulders and came to a sudden stop. Still facing Bossk, Mokshok continued, “These clones do whatever they’re told. If you were more like them, you might not have wound up in the infirmary.”

Bossk responded with a wheezing laugh. “That a fact? Seems to me you should be glad I’m not like them.”

“Why’s that?”

“Because I usually only kill for money. But those guys ...” He tilted his chin toward the troopers. “The only thing stopping

Ryder Windham

them *from* tearing your ugly head off is no one's asked them yet." Bossk's eyes flicked to the troopers as he barked, "Hey, soldier boys! Wanna have some *real* fun?"

The pirates who had regarded the four troopers as obedient, acrobatic servants suddenly imagined their violent potential. Then the pirates glanced at one another, and began backing away cautiously from the troopers.

Nuru noticed several pirates had moved their hands toward their holstered blasters. He glanced at Gunn and sensed her anxiety, that she was wondering the same thing he was. *Where's Cleaver?*

Bossk looked at the four troopers and wheezed laughter again. Returning his gaze to Mokshok, he said, "Lookin' a little worried there, friend. See, if I were you, I'd be thinking the best use for a bunch of clones is target practice."

Bossk began to raise his blaster rifle.

Nuru sprang from his chair, leaping high into the air.

Bossk stopped raising his rifle, holding it so its barrel was aimed at one of the troopers.

Nuru gracefully executed a midair somersault as he snatched his lightsaber from the pocket in his coveralls and thumbed the activator switch, igniting its blade with a loud hum.

Bossk's thick Trandosha finger flexed against the rifle's trigger.

Still airborne and with his lightsaber blazing, Nuru angled his legs and positioned himself to land in front of the troopers.

Bossk's weapon fired, launching an energy bolt at the nearest trooper.

Nuru was still descending to the banquet hall's deck as he swung his lightsaber to slam the energy bolt back at the Trandosha. The bolt smashed into Bossk's rifle, shattering it instantly and knocking it from Bossk's grip.

As Bossk's rifle clattered against the deck, Gunn jumped up from Mcgrrrr's table and ran to Nuru's side. She was still running toward him when Nuru saw a nearby pirate draw a blaster pistol.

STAR WARS: Curse of the Black Hole Pirates

Holding tight to his lightsaber with his left hand, Nuru extended his right hand as he used the Force to snare the pistol, yanking it from the startled pirate's fingers. The pistol sailed through the air toward Nuru and into his waiting hand. He immediately tossed the pistol to Gunn, who caught it just before she arrived at his side.

The pirates gaped in astonishment at the sight of Nuru's lightsaber. Gunn shifted her body behind Nuru so her back was up against his. Gunn said, "Maybe my plan wasn't such a good idea after all."

"*Now* you tell me," Nuru muttered. He scanned the pirates who stood before him. As his lightsaber hummed, he said, "Drop your weapons, and surrender at once."

"Jedi?!" Mcgrrrr gasped as he rose from his seat. "The boy is a Jedi?!"

Wheezing laughter came from Nuru's left. He glanced at Bossk, who stood with his arms braced across his chest. When the Trandoshan was done laughing, he said, "Surrender to you, blue-boy? Ha! Just hand over the laser sword, and I'll carve you up neatly *before* I eat you."

Nuru was about to respond when he noticed a dark, humanoid figure move low and fast behind Bossk. The figure appeared to be carrying a large bag as he darted for a shadowy alcove. The figure's arm lashed out, flinging the bag at a low angle so it sailed past Bossk, struck the deck, and slid toward the four troopers who had remained at attention at the center of the chamber.

All the pirates watched the bag slide to a stop near the troopers, then turned to the alcove to see the mysterious newcomer who had thrown the sack. The pirates cringed as a second lightsaber ignited in the shadows, but Nuru saw something else. A pair of bright white eyes glowed in the darkness above and behind the lightsaber.

Cleaver.

Ryder Windham

The pirates were momentarily fixated on the dark figure they assumed was a second Jedi, but then they heard ratcheting sounds from the chamber's center, and returned their attention to the troopers. The troopers had quickly emptied the cargo sack and now stood in a tight circle, facing away from one another, with their blaster rifles leveled and ready to open fire on the pirates.

"The troopers were only pretending to be defective," Nuru said. "Each one is an expert shot."

"Goody," Bossk said, gnashing his teeth as he prepared to throw himself at the troopers. "Let's dance!"

"No!" Mcgrrrr shouted so loud that even Bossk was surprised. Then Mcgrrrr looked directly at Nuru and said, "Obey the Jedi! No one even *thinks* of harming the Jedi or their allies!"

Bossk said, "Huh?"

"You heard the cap'n!" Mokshok said as he faced his fellow pirates. "Lay down your weapons! All of you!"

Nuru watched with amazement as all the pirates carefully removed their weapons from their holsters and belts and placed them on the deck. Then he glanced at Veeren, who was gazing back at him. He felt some satisfaction in seeing that she looked relieved. But then, Gunn said, "Don't trust 'em, kid. Pirates will trick you every time."

"It's no trick, I assure you," Mcgrrrr said as he stepped away from his table, raising his hands so Nuru could see they were empty. "The fact is that we have long hoped for a Jedi to arrive here, as we believe only a Jedi can help us escape the sector." Tears welled up in his eyes as he added, "You really *are* a Jedi, aren't you?"

Nuru nodded. "I am Nuru Kungurama. My friend in the shadows is a droid." Keeping his eyes on Mcgrrrr, he said, "Come on out, Cleaver."

Still holding Ring-Sol Ambase's lightsaber, Cleaver emerged from the dark alcove. Breaker said, "Good work, Cleaver."

STAR WARS: Curse of the Black Hole Pirates

“Thank you, Master Breaker.” Remembering the Patrolian he'd encountered earlier, he added, “I should mention that I subdued one pirate and left him tied up on the *Hasty Harpy*. I hope I did the right thing. His permanent termination seemed unnecessary.

“I'm sure you used good judgment,” Nuru said.

Mcgrrrr glanced at Cleaver, then looked back at Nuru and said, “A Jedi. How very fantastic.” Then he looked at Veeren and said, “You're his sister. Are you a Jedi, too?”

Before Veeren could respond, Nuru answered “She is neither my sister nor a Jedi. She is a Chiss ambassador under my protection.”

“I only wish you'd identified yourself sooner!” Mcgrrrr said. He turned to Mokshok. “Set course for Plunder Moon!”

“Aye, Cap'n,” Mokshok said.

Bossk looked from the lightsaber-wielding droid commando to the four Republic troopers. Then he shifted his gaze to the disarmed Black Hole Pirates and then to their captain, who was practically beaming at the Jedi boy. Shaking his head with disgust, Bossk said, “You're all screwy.”

Chapter Nine

“All right, Mcgrrrr,” Lalo Gunn said. “You and your pirates are off the hook.”

“I’m pleased to know it,” Mcgrrrr said with a polite bow.

Gunn had just completed a thorough inspection of her transport to confirm that the dent made by Bossk’s head in the cabin’s wall was the only damage caused by the Black Hole Pirates. She had warned Mcgrrrr that if any part of her ship were broken or missing, she would not be pleased.

Gunn and Mcgrrrr were standing with Nuru, the four clone troopers, Cleaver, and Veeren in the *Hasty Harpy*’s main cabin. Robonino had been freed and released to the other pirates. Gunn’s compact blaster was back in place inside her right boot, and Cleaver had returned Ring-Sol Ambase’s lightsaber to Nuru. Nuru had changed out of his borrowed coveralls and was once again in his Jedi robes. The troopers had removed their helmets, and they watched Mcgrrrr warily.

The *Harpy* remained docked with the Vangaard Pathfinder, which in turn was docked with the *Random Mallet*. All the ships and pirate starfighters were traveling toward a small moon in orbit of a gas planet. Facing Mcgrrrr, Nuru said, “You say we’re on course for Plunder Moon?”

STAR WARS: Curse of the Black Hole Pirates

Mcgrrrr nodded. "That's the name we gave to the world where we placed the two Sullustans who refused to become pirates. They arrived out of hyperspace about eight years ago. Did I mention these Sullustans are sort of historians?"

"No, you didn't," Nuru said. "What do you mean by 'sort of'?"

Mcgrrrr scratched his chin. "Well, they're more like scientific researchers. They say they study ancient artifacts to learn about long-dead civilizations. There's a name for what they do ..."

"Xenoarchaeology," Nuru said.

"That's it," Mcgrrrr said. "Anyway, not long after we delivered them to Plunder Moon, they began exploring an ancient structure, a partially collapsed pyramid. Inside the pyramid, they found alien glyphs and technology. According to the Sullustans, these glyphs suggest the tech can only be activated by someone with Force powers."

Nuru's red eyes went wide. "Captain Mcgrrrr, have the Sullustans encountered any large, blueskinned reptiles?"

"None that I know of," Mcgrrrr replied. "But I recall the glyphs had images of saurian creatures. Why?"

"Because from what you've described, the pyramid sounds like a Star Temple built by a reptilian species, the ancient Kwa. Their descendants are the Kwi, who still exist on scattered worlds."

Impatient, Gunn said, "What do a bunch of old lizards have to do with getting us away from the black hole?"

"Possibly everything," Nuru said. "Jedi scholars learned that the Kwa harnessed the power of the cosmos - possibly the power of the Force itself - inside massive underground chambers that lay below the Star Temples. The Kwa used this power to travel the universe through planetary-based hyperspace portals that they called Infinity Gates, and designed the Star Temples to protect the integrity of these gates."

"Whoa," Gunn said. "Planetary-based portals? That's impossible. Everyone knows you can't hyperspace until you're

Ryder Windham

free of a planet's gravity. There's no way you can do it from inside a planet."

"As *I* understand it," Nuru continued, "the Kwa may have also possessed powers that allowed them to control their technology. Only a few Star Temples have ever been discovered. The Kwa left behind ferocious monsters and many hidden death traps to deal with intruders."

"I haven't heard of any monsters or traps," Mcgrrrr said. "All I know is that the Sullustans say the ancient tech can only be activated by a Jedi. The way they tell it, the tech could allow a number of ships to make a hyperspace jump out of this realm."

Gunn looked at Nuru and said, "Is this true? Can you make this happen?"

Nuru glanced at Veeren, and then at the troopers. He realized everyone was waiting and hoping for a positive response from him, as if their lives depended on it. He said, "Kwa technology is very powerful ... but extremely dangerous. At the Jedi Temple, I learned of an incident that happened about nine years ago. A small Star Temple was discovered on the planet Ova. Evidently, Kwa Star Temples can be used not just for interstellar travel, but as weapons to direct powerful waves of energy, called *infinity waves*, across the galaxy. Shortly after it was discovered, another planet's Star Temple fired an infinity wave at Ova."

Gunn said, "What happened?"

"Ova was obliterated."

"Oh," Gunn said, raising her eyebrows. "So where does that leave us?"

Veeran cleared her throat, then said, "I do not mean to say this as a threat, Nuru Kungurama, but merely as a statement of fact. If I am not returned to Chiss space, the ascendancy may go to war with the Republic. It is not my wish for this to happen, yet the situation is beyond my control. If there is anything you can do to help us leave this sector, I will alert the ascendancy that it was the Separatists — not the Republic — that attacked Defense Force Station lfpe'a ... and I would be most grateful."

STAR WARS: Curse of the Black Hole Pirates

Nuru did not want to disappoint Veeren. He said, "I imagine I'll have a better idea of how to proceed after we meet the Sullustans, and they show me what they've found at the pyramid."

"You'll meet them soon enough," Mcgrrrr said as he gestured to the periscopic viewscreen. "We're descending to Plunder Moon now."

Even though the ancient stone pyramid was partially collapsed, Nuru thought it was an impressive sight. Its height was ten times longer than the *Random Mallet's* overall length, and it loomed like an artificial mountain over the Sullustans' Camp, several small structures that made up the only other architecture on the lunar surface. The pyramid's sharply angled peak was so high above the ground that it seemed to permanently stab the crimson sky, just as it had done for over one hundred thousand years. Nuru could not help marveling over the fact that the pyramid was so many eons older than the Jedi Order itself, and that most of the edifice was still standing.

The Black Hole Pirates had undocked and landed their ships along with the *Hasty Harpy* on a wide stretch of rocky ground beside the pyramid. While Veeren waited with Gunn and Cleaver aboard the *Harpy*, Nuru descended the *Harpy's* ramp along with Mcgrrrr and the four troopers, then walked toward the Sullustans' camp.

Because Mcgrrrr had referred to two Sullustans living on Plunder Moon, Nuru was surprised to see three emerge from one of the camp structures, which were arranged beside a large vegetable garden. Two Sullustans were adults, a male and female, both jowly-faced humanoids distinguished by big, black eyes and large, prominent ears. The third was a Sullustan child, who appeared to be about six years old, and held the adult male's hand.

Nuru glanced at Mcgrrrr and said, "You didn't tell me they were a family."

Ryder Windham

"You didn't ask," Mcgrrrr replied with a grin. "Their daughter was born a few years ago."

The Sullustans trotted cautiously over to meet the landing party. The adult male Sullustan, who had the largest ears, looked at Nuru and the troopers, then stared at Mcgrrrr.

"What's going on, you thieving devil?" he said. "Found some other unfortunate fellows who have no interest in working for you?"

Mcgrrrr laughed. "It's good to see you, too, Professor Groob. Allow me to introduce Nuru Kungurama, a Jedi."

The three Sullustans stared at Nuru, who was only slightly taller than Professor Groob. "Real Jedi carry real lightsabers. How about you?" asked the professor.

Nuru pushed back his robe to reveal the two lightsabers clipped to his belt. He said, "Do you require a demonstration?"

The adult Sullustans glanced at each other, then Groob said, "No! Please, forgive our skepticism!" Gesturing to his fellow Sullustans, he said, "My wife and colleague, Parv Dijj, and our daughter, Ulsee. Parv and I are ... I mean, we *were* professors of xenoarchaeology at the University of Ketaris."

Parv Dijj said, "Imagine our surprise when we discovered a Kwa Star Temple here!"

"But we're all eager to leave and go home," Groob added quickly. "Will you help us, young Jedi? Will you?"

Nuru was taken aback by the earnestness of the Sullustan's request. He said, "I don't know how much you know about Kwa technology, but in the wrong hands, it's been known to destroy entire star systems."

Groob said, "If you're referring to the Star Temple on Ova, I dare say we know more than most."

"We *discovered* the Ova Temple," Parv continued with obvious pride, "and provided the report that notified the Jedi Council about its existence!"

Groob added, "If we hadn't traveled to Coruscant to deliver our report, we might have been on Ova when it vanished into

STAR WARS: Curse of the Black Hole Pirates

infinity! Not that we were entirely lucky. We were on our way back to the University of Ketaris when our ship fell out of hyperspace and wound up *here*.”

Nuru got the impression that the Sullustans were enjoying the opportunity to talk about their experiences. Turning his gaze to the pyramid, he said, “Captain Mcgrrrr said you haven't stumbled across any monstrous guardians or traps in or around the Star Temple. Is this true?”

Groob nodded. “On Ova, we found plenty of traps and barely escaped an attack by enormous whuffa worms. The Kwa used whuffas as guardians for their temples. But on this world, we've found only the fossilized remains of whuffas. The worst danger is collapsing rubble.”

Parv nodded in agreement, then added, “Clearing a route through the pyramid to the stellar control station wasn't easy.”

“You've seen the station?” Nuru said. “The activation controls are functional?”

Groob said, “I believe you'll find that all they need are a Jedi's touch.”

“How do you reach the station?”

“We fly!” Groob exclaimed. “Mcgrrrr left us with a swoop, which we keep in that shelter over there.” He faced Mcgrrrr, then continued, “You have our salvage ship. If you return it, we'll lead you through the pyramid's collapsed area. After that, we'll all fly down through the caverns to the stellar control station.”

“You can't be serious,” Mcgrrrr said, gesturing to the landed ships. “Are you suggesting we fly all these ships ... underground? You must be mad!”

“Don't worry,” Groob said. “The caverns are huge, with room to spare for your frigate.”

“But where will we land?”

“At the stellar control station, of course.” Turning to Parv and Ulsee, Groob said, “Gather our datacards and leave everything else. We're heading home!”

Ryder Windham

“Home?” said young Ulsee, speaking for the first time. “Really?”

Nuru, Mcgrrrr, and the four troopers watched the Sullustans trot back to their camp to collect their records of the archaeological dig. Breaker moved close beside Nuru and said, “The Sullustans make it sound like we have nothing to worry about.”

“Indeed they do,” Nuru replied without conviction.

The Sullustans returned, carrying sacks stuffed with datacards. Mcgrrrr escorted them to the saucershaped Ugor salvage ship, which was the Sullustans' rightful property. Mcgrrrr proceeded to the *Random Mallet's* bridge, where he began issuing orders over the commo. Nuru and the troopers returned to the *Harpy*, where they informed Gunn, Veeren, and Cleaver about the Sullustans and the planned journey to the Star Temple's stellar control station.

Nuru was in the *Harpy's* cockpit with Gunn and Chatterbox when they received Mcgrrrr's instructions. Gunn eyed the pyramid and said, “We're supposed to fly into that thing to make a hyperspace jump? That kind of goes against all of my better judgment.” Glancing back at Nuru, she said, “You trust these Sullustans?”

“I sensed that they were sincere,” he said.

“They'd better be,” Gunn said. “Because if they're setting us up, I won't bother letting them live to regret it.”

One by one, the ships lifted off the lunar surface. The *Harpy* and the pirate vessels followed the Sullustans' saucer around to the pyramid's far side, where the collapsed area had left a gaping hole. The Sullustans activated their saucer's powerful floodlights and then entered the hole, illuminating the passage for the others who trailed behind.

Gunn switched on the *Harpy's* running lights as they descended into a cavern. From what Nuru could see of the surrounding rock walls that slid past the cockpit's window, the

STAR WARS: Curse of the Black Hole Pirates

Sullustans had been truthful in their assessment of the cavern's size.

The cavern widened, and the ships proceeded into an enormous chamber with a wide, sloping wall. At first, Nuru thought it was a natural wall, but as they flew closer to it, he saw it was constructed with massive blocks of cut stone.

The Sullustans headed for a vertical break in the wall, and led the other ships into the chasm. The chasm emptied into an even more enormous chamber, at the center of which was a gigantic geodesic sphere that was sheathed in smooth hexagonal plates, which emitted an eerie white radiance.

Chatterbox said, "Look at the size of that thing."

"Button your lip!" said Gunn.

"It's the power station," Nuru said. He was amazed by the glowing sphere's immensity, and estimated its diameter at more than two kilometers. "Keep following the Sullustans."

The Sullustans maneuvered their saucer around the sphere to a slot that spanned the width of an entire hexagonal plate. As the ships neared the slot, Gunn realized it was an inset landing platform, wide enough to accommodate many vessels. She asked, "When did the old lizards build this place?"

"More than a hundred thousand years ago," Nuru replied.

"But it looks so ... new."

The Sullustans entered the slot and landed. The *Harpy's* thrusters kicked on and she touched down beside the saucer. Nuru said, "Keep the engines running, Gunn. I don't know what we'll find here, but I expect we may need to leave in a hurry."

Nuru was already heading out of the *Harpy's* cockpit as the *Random Mallet*, two pathfinders, and seven starfighters hovered into the slot and settled onto the ancient platform. Stepping into the *Harpy's* main cabin, Nuru found Veeren, Breaker, Knuckles, Sharp, and Cleaver staring at the periscopic viewscreen, which now displayed the Kwa-constructed landing area. Nuru said, "Knuckles and Cleaver, stay with the Aristocra. Breaker and Sharp, come with me."

Ryder Windham

Vereen said, "I wish to go, too."

"You should stay here," Nuru said. "It's safer."

"Please. I want to see this place."

Nuru glanced at Knuckles and Cleaver. "All right," he said. "We'll all go. But he prepared to return to the ship immediately on my order."

The three troopers donned their helmets and checked their weapons as they escorted Nuru and Vereen down the *Harpy's* ramp. Cleaver followed with his own blaster rifle. A moment later, Captain Mcgrrrr and Bossk emerged from the Mallet, and then Professor Groob climbed out of his saucer to join Nuru and the others on the platform.

Nuru was surprised to see Bossk, who had replaced his ruined blaster rifle with a new one, which he gripped tightly in front of him. Bossk's tongue darted back and forth between his teeth as he stated at Nuru. The young Jedi faced Mcgrrrr and said, "Why did you bring the bounty hunter?" He had to speak loudly so his voice could be heard over the sound of the *Harpy's* engines.

"I won't bore you with details," Mcgrrrr answered. "Bossk is my new first mate."

"Mokshok had an accident," Bossk said.

"How unfortunate," Nuru said warily.

Mcgrrrr leaned closer to Nuru and said, "Don't worry about Bossk. He's just muscle. If we run into anything unexpected, he could be useful."

Professor Groob patted Nuru's arm and said, "The main controls are straight through there, at the end of the corridor." Groob gestured to a triangular doorway in a nearby wall, which was adorned with bizarre glyphs. "I believe I can show you how to operate the controls, but only you can open the gateway for a hyperspace jump."

"Just a moment," Mcgrrrr said. "Shouldn't we talk about where we're going to jump? That is, we ... well, some of us don't want to jump just *anywhere*."

STAR WARS: Curse of the Black Hole Pirates

Nuru looked at Groob and said, “Can the controls be adjusted for specific coordinates?”

“Yes.” Groob said. “That is, I *think* so.”

“What?” Mcgrrrr said. “You don’t know for certain?”

“Ha! I suppose you think I should pop into the nearest convenience store and buy an instruction manual for ancient Kwa technology?”

“But if you don't know, how can we be sure the station even works?!”

While Groob and Mcgrrrr argued, Nuru noticed that Veeren had stepped away from Cleaver's side so she could inspect a series of glyphs that were etched into the wall to the left of the triangular doorway. As Veeren extended her hand to touch the glyphs, Nuru sensed a sudden tension in the air.

“Aristocra!”

And then the wall exploded outward, spraying dust and rubble in all directions and sending Veeren sprawling back against the platform. Nuru was already running to Veeren's position as he saw what had shattered the stone wall.

The massive head of a giant whuffa worm lolled in the newly formed hole, flexing its maw to display the long, diamond-hard teeth it used for burrowing through densely packed ground. Then the whuffa thrust its muscular mass forward, writhing out of the hole so it was poised to strike Veeren.

Nuru sprang and landed beside Veeren's supine form. He had hoped to shove or pull her away from danger, but as he grasped her arms, the whuffa flexed its maw wider and dropped its head fast.

Nuru and Veeren were swallowed instantly.

Chapter Ten

Veeen clung to Nuru as the giant whuffa lifted its head to let gravity pull the two Chiss down its dark throat. The stench was so overwhelming that Veeen almost gagged.

Holding right to Veeen, Nuru felt a stinging sensation at the back of one hand as it slid across the monster's inner flesh, which was slick with digestive acids. The whuffa flexed its jaws again, allowing light to penetrate its roomy mouth. Veeen screamed.

Nuru yanked his right arm out from behind her and seized his lightsaber from his belt. Looking up, he extended his arm toward the whuffa's brain sac and was about to ignite his weapon's blade when two rapid blasts sounded from outside. A pair of energy bolts tore through the whuffa's body, spraying gore and narrowly missing Veeen's body.

Nuru realized someone had fired a blaster rifle at close range into the whuffa. The monster responded reflexively by closing its jaws and thrashing its bulk away from the direction of the shooter. The sudden movement cast Nuru and Veeen back into darkness and sent them deeper into the whuffa's gullet.

Sliding away from the brain sac, Nuru nearly lost his grip on Veeen as he braced his legs and back against the inner walls of the whuffa's mouth and activated his lightsaber. He drove the weapon through the creature's flesh, then swiveled his wrist.

STAR WARS: Curse of the Black Hole Pirates

The whuffa opened its jaws, allowing light to pour into its mouth as it erupted into a bloodcurdling shriek. Sighting the brain sac again, Nuru winced as he plunged his lightsaber into it.

The whuffa was still shrieking as its entire body convulsed. Its cry ended a moment later as it collapsed upon the ancient landing platform. Nuru had no sooner deactivated his lightsaber when he and Veeren tumbled out of the monster's mouth.

Dazed, Nuru pushed himself up from the gore-slicked platform. He could see the *Hasty Harpy's* aft section, but the whuffa's enormous corpse blocked his view of his allies and the other ships. As he Veeren to her feet, Breaker and Sharp ran around the whuffa to arrive at Nuru's side. Breaker said, "Are you two all right?"

"Barely," Nuru said as he wiped his hands off on the inside of his robe. Veeren was trembling but did not budge as Nuru lifted a dry edge of his robe up to her head and gently rubbed the muck from her face and hair. "Who shot the whuffa?"

"The Trandoshan," Sharp said as they edged around the dead monster. "The fool would have kept shooting but Knuckles grabbed his rifle."

They found Bossk standing a short distance away from Mcgrrrr and Professor Groob. Bossk was glaring at Knuckles and Cleaver. Knuckles was not only still holding Bossk's rifle but had it aimed at the Trandoshan's head.

"I was just trying, to kill the thing!" Bossk splattered. Then he noticed Nuru and Veeren approaching, and added, "Besides, if anyone's gonna eat the blue kids, it's gonna be me!"

Facing Bossk, Nuru said, "Return to the *Random Mallet* immediately, or Mcgrrrr will be needing another new first mate."

Bossk looked at Knuckles and said, "My rifle. I want it."

"Forget it," Knuckles replied. "Start walking."

Bossk looked at Mcgrrrr. Mcgrrrr said, "You heard the man, Bossk."

Bossk's head jerked back, and then he made a hacking noise as he launched a spray of spit that splattered against Knuckles'

Ryder Windham

helmet. Knuckles didn't flinch. Bossk let out a wheezing laugh as he turned and stalked back to the Mallet's ramp.

Mcgrrrr looked at Professor Groob and said, "What's the deal? I thought you said the whuffas were extinct!"

Facing the whuffa's corpse, Professor Groob shook his head, which made his large ears wiggle. "Astonishing," he said. "All these years on this moon, and not once did we ever encounter a live one. It's as if this particular one were waiting for us to ..."

A rumbling sound echoed throughout the vast underground chamber. Before Nuru could order one of the troopers to bring Veeren back to the *Harpy*, the landing platform's surface buckled and exploded, and another whuffa's monstrous head rose up from the dust. A moment later, two other sections of platform near the *Harpy* shattered to reveal more whuffas. Veeren grabbed Nuru's arm as she cried, "They're everywhere!"

More whuffas appeared. The three troopers and Cleaver did not wait for Nuru to issue a command. They opened fire on the monsters, aiming for their mouths. Mcgrrrr whipped out his own blaster pistol and joined in the fight.

The whuffas had cut off any direct path back to the *Harpy*. Gazing past the whuffas, Nuru saw Gunn and Chatterbox in the *Harpy's* cockpit. He waved his arm to get Chatterbox's attention, then made a series of quick gestures with his hand, signaling Chatterbox to launch the *Harpy* away from the spherical station.

The *Harpy's* thrusters roared. The transport practically leaped as it left the landing pad and flew in reverse to exit the station. The pirate ships and the Sullustans' saucer saw the departing transport and were quick to follow its lead.

As Breaker, Sharp, Knuckles, Cleaver, and Mcgrrrr continued firing at the incoming whuffas, Nuru looked at Groob and shouted, "Take us to the controls! Now!"

Groob scurried for the triangular doorway and into the corridor that he had pointed out earlier. Nuru and Veeren ran after him. Mcgrrrr and the troopers followed, with Cleaver at the rear, providing protective fire. The droid walked backward into

STAR WARS: Curse of the Black Hole Pirates

the corridor so he could keep his photoreceptors and rifle trained on the whuffas.

A whuffa rammed its head into the doorway's triangular frame. Cleaver continued walking backward as he emptied his blaster rifle's energy charge into the monster's head. The whuffa released a rush of foul air into the corridor as it exhaled its last breath.

Groob, Nuru, and Veeren were the first to arrive at the chamber that contained the station's controls. Set on the angled surface of a stone pedestal, the controls included a set of green crystals and gold metal levers that were positioned next to two illuminated green indents. Each indent was an impression from the right hand of a three-fingered, clawed creature. A large, stone-framed viewscreen, which vaguely resembled a half-open eye, was built into the wall beside the pedestal.

As the three troopers, Mcgrrrr, and Cleaver arrived at the end of the corridor, Groob motioned for Nuru to join him behind the controls. Groob said, "Place your hand here!" He pointed to the first green indent.

"But that's the impression of a large lizard's claw," Nuru protested. "It was designed for the Kwa, not--"

Nuru was interrupted by a loud thud from behind a nearby wall. Realizing that the whuffas might soon be upon them, Groob said, "No time to argue!" He grabbed Nuru's right wrist and shoved the Jedi's hand down into the first indent.

A humming sound came from within the pedestal, and then its crystals glowed brightly. Nuru felt a strange warmth travel up the length of his arm. The eye-shaped viewscreen blinked on, and a galactic star chart came into focus.

"It works!" Groob said. "Now, if you adjust this lever, you should be able to plot a course away from here. Then place your right hand in this indent to open the Infinity Gate."

Nuru pushed at one lever, and the star chart on the viewscreen appeared to rotate. As all eyes turned to the

Ryder Windham

viewscreen, the star chart slid away, and was replaced by a view of a single solar system.

Mcgrrrr asked, "Anyone recognize that system?"

Before anyone could respond, a louder thud came from overhead, and a crack formed across the control chamber's ceiling. Veeren looked at Nuru and said, "Hurry. Just do what you must to get us out of here."

Without any idea of the consequences, Nuru moved his right hand into the second indent.

A thunderous crack sounded from beyond the corridor. Groob said, "It's done. The Infinity Gate is open. We have to get back to our ships."

Leaving the controls, Nuru led the group back into the corridor. He said, "Breaker, contact Chatterbox. Tell him to pick us up at the edge of the landing pad."

As Breaker used his helmet's comlink to summon Chatterbox, Cleaver walked up beside Nuru and said, "Commander, I regret to inform you that I left a dead whuffa blocking the doorway at the end of this Corridor. How will we get out?"

Without breaking his stride, Nuru looked and replied, "It appears the other whuffa have already taken care of that problem for us."

Cleaver and the others saw the doorway was clear. Marks on the floor indicated the corpse had been dragged away. Nuru said, "I don't know how smart the whuffas are, but I suspect they know this is the only exit."

Cleaver said, "Commander, I further regret that I depleted my weapon's power supply."

"Perhaps this might be useful," Nuru said. He reached to his belt, removed Ring-Sol Ambase's lightsaber, and handed it to the droid. "Cleaver, do what you can to create a diversion."

"Yes, sir," Cleaver said. Carrying the lightsaber, he stepped through the doorway.

The dead whuffa had not been hauled far from the corridor's entrance, and lay just a short distance away from Cleaver. The

STAR WARS: Curse of the Black Hole Pirates

droid automatically counted seventeen live whuffas waiting on the landing platform, their horrific heads poised facing the doorway. He calculated the respective distance between their positions, then activated the lightsaber and sprinted for the nearest whuffa. As he leaped past the monster, he swung the lightsaber through two of the whuffa's thick teeth. The whuffa howled. In an instant, all the whuffas were surging across the platform, chasing after Cleaver.

Nuru motioned for Veeren, Mcgrrrr, Groob, and the three troopers to stop in the corridor behind him as he peered out from the doorway. He made sure Cleaver had effectively lured the whuffas to the far side of the landing platform, then looked to the platform's edge. Beyond the platform, shimmering lights danced in the air of the vast underground chamber. The lights reminded him of ...

Hyperspace!

Nuru didn't know how long the Infinity Gate would remain open. *Where's the Harpy?* he wondered.

Breaker moved up beside Nuru just in time to see Gunn's transport descend to a low hover. The *Harpy's* ramp was already extended. Breaker said, "There's our ride."

"Let's go," Nuru said. He grabbed Vereen's arm, pulling her along with him as he bolted for the hovering transport. Groob and Mcgrrrr went next, followed by the troopers. Breaker cast a quick glance in Cleaver's direction as he ran behind Sharp and Knuckles.

Chatterbox stood waiting at the top of the *Harpy's* ramp. Nuru helped Veeren onto the ramp, then made sure Mcgrrrr and Groob got on, too. Chatterbox guided the passengers through the open hatch until Nuru came to a stop beside him. Nuru and Chatterbox watched Knuckles, Sharp, and Breaker approach, but then Breaker stopped and said, "Cleaver."

Nuru followed Breaker's gaze to see Cleaver swinging Ambase's lightsaber at the whuffas. Two whuffas lunged at Cleaver, but the droid leaped up into the air and the whuffas

Ryder Windham

collided with each other instead. Cleaver twisted his body in midair, landed on a whuffa's back, and bounced off, angling toward the waiting *Harpy*. He switched off the lightsaber and hit the ground running.

As the whuffas charged after the droid, Knuckles and Sharp scampered up onto the ramp. They moved past Nuru and Chatterbox, who remained braced outside the transport. Facing Breaker, Nuru said, "Come on."

"I'm waiting for Cleaver."

"Move, Breaker. That's an order."

Breaker scrambled onto the ramp. The *Harpy* began to pull away from the landing platform. Seeing Cleaver running toward the platform's edge, Breaker shouted, "Jump!"

A whuffa was actually gaining on Cleaver as the droid leaped from the platform's edge, his arms extended in front of him. His outstretched metal fingers missed the *Harpy's* platform and he began to fall.

Seeing the droid plummet, Breaker shouted, "No!"

But just then Cleaver appeared to bounce off an invisible cushion of air, and he soared up toward Breaker. Breaker did not pause to wonder how Cleaver had become airborne, but held tight to the side of the *Harpy* with one hand as he caught the droid's left wrist with the other, then he swung Cleaver up onto the ramp beside him. Only then did Breaker notice Nuru — still braced beside Chatterbox — had his right hand directed toward Cleaver. Breaker realized Nuru had used the Force to catch Cleaver and yank him back to the ship.

Cleaver followed Breaker's gaze and said, "Thank you, Commander Nuru."

"Thank me later!" Nuru said as he and Chatterbox hauled Breaker and Cleaver into the *Harpy*. The ramp lifted and the hatch sealed. Nuru ran through the main cabin, passing Groob, Knuckles, and Sharp, and didn't stop running until reached the cockpit. Gunn and Mcgrrrr were seated behind the controls, and Veeren stood behind Gunn's seat.

STAR WARS: Curse of the Black Hole Pirates

Nuru looked through the cockpit window and saw the pirate ships in front of them, hovering near the side of the immense, glowing sphere as lights continued to shimmer throughout the chamber. Then the lights swirled and converged into a vortex. Veeren gasped at the sight.

"It's a hyperspace portal," Nuru said. "Mcgrrrr, hail the other ships. Tell them to fly into the portal."

"But where will we go?"

"With any luck, far from here," Gunn said. "Just do it!"

Mcgrrrr hailed the other ships. The pathfinders moved forward, then vanished into the vortex, followed by the Sullustans' saucer, the pirate starfighters, and the *Random Mallet*.

"Here goes nothing," Gunn said as she sent her transport into the vortex.

The *Harpy* shuddered as it plunged into a brilliant cascade of energy, and then a loud, harmonic whine traveled through the ship. Mcgrrrr said, "What was that noise?"

"Beats me," Gunn said as she checked her consoles. "I've never heard it before."

Listening carefully, Nuru said, "That noise isn't coming from the ship. It's from ... outside."

"Sure doesn't sound like hyperspace to me," Gunn said. "I wonder how long it's gonna—"

Before Gunn could finish, the noise faded out, the cascade of light vanished, and the *Harpy* emerged into outer space, surrounded by stars. Through the cockpit window, the pirate vessels and the Sullustans' saucer were all in view.

Gunn said, "Where's the nebula and the black hole? That jump barely lasted thirty seconds. We couldn't have jumped far." She glanced at her scopes, then added, "My compass must still be on the blink. The readout says we're back in Chiss space."

Mcgrrrr said, "Then ... we're free from the black hole!"

Nuru sensed Veeren become tense beside him. Her red eyes were locked on something outside the ship, beyond the pirate vessels. And then Nuru saw what she saw, too.

Ryder Windham

A large silhouette of an inverted conical station was suspended against the stars.

"There's nothing wrong with the compass, Gunn," Nuru said. "See over there? We've arrived back at the Chiss space station."

Mcgrrrr looked at Gunn and said, "Chiss space? And where exactly is that in relation to ... anywhere?"

Ignoring Mcgrrrr, Gunn muttered, "It's not possible." Turning to Nuru, she repeated, "It's not possible! It took us almost ten hours to travel from Chiss space to the black hole sector." She shook her head. "How could we have covered that distance again so much faster?"

"We didn't use an Infinity Gate the first time," Nuru replied.

Mcgrrrr looked at a console. "No readings from that space station," he said, "but we are picking up a signal from a ship beside it. A Metalorn yacht."

Nuru said, "That's Umbrag's ship." Closing his eyes, he reached out with the Force, searching for any psychic trace of Ring-Sol Ambase. He sensed no sign of his missing Master.

"But where's the rest of Umbrag's fleet?" Gunn said. "There's no sign of them."

Mcgrrrr asked, "Who's Umbrag?"

"Bad guy," Gunn said. "We don't like him."

Mcgrrrr grinned. "Then my pirates and I don't like him, either."

The Skakoan Overseer Umbrag was sitting on the bridge of his Metalorn yacht, polishing his metal-rimmed goggles, when a skeletal battle droid stepped up to him and said, "Five starships and seven starfighters are heading this way, sir. The largest ship is a frigate."

"I wasn't expecting any reinforcements," Umbrag said through his breathing apparatus.

"They aren't Separatist vessels, sir."

Umbrag's eyes went wide behind his goggles. "Republic warships?"

STAR WARS: Curse of the Black Hole Pirates

“Negative, sir. I think they’re pirates.”

Before Umbrag could respond, a large explosion wracked his entire yacht, launching him out of his seat. Umbrag grunted as he crashed to the floor.

The droid said, “That sounded like a concussion missile!”

Rising to his feet, Umbrag shoved the droid aside and stepped toward a console that displayed a stream of data beside twelve blips that represented the incoming ships. “Count Dooku told me that no one would approach this station after I claimed it!” Umbrag fumed. “I wouldn’t have followed Dooku’s orders and sent my armada back to Skako if I’d known there was any possibility of an attack!”

Another explosion rocked the yacht. The droid cried, “Perhaps Count Dooku was mistaken, sir?”

Umbrag launched his armored fist into the droid’s head. As the droid stumbled from him, Umbrag turned to face two more droids who stood before the navigation controls and shouted, “Get us out of here! Back to Skako! Now!”

The yacht’s engines fired, then it sped away from the Chiss space Station. The yacht took three more violent hits before it vanished into hyperspace.

The remaining ships circled the area of the yacht’s departure, then turned and angled back, heading for the conical space station. They were still moving toward the station when sixty Chiss assault cruisers dropped out of hyperspace to surround them from all sides.

Chapter Eleven

“You and all your companions are free to leave,” Veeren said.

She was standing in a large docking bay on the Chiss space station, facing Nuru, Captain Mcgrrrr, and Professor Groob. The *Hasty Harpy* rested on a platform near Nuru’s group, and the Sullustans’ saucer and a shuttle from the *Random Mallet* were parked on neighboring platforms. Breaker, Sharp, and Cleaver stood at the bottom of the *Harpy’s* ramp, watching Nuru and waiting for his return.

Mcgrrrr lifted his eyebrows and said, “You mean, you’re letting the Black Hole Pirates loose?”

“Correct,” Veeren said. “Although the Chiss Ascendancy acknowledges that none of you were responsible for the Separatist attack, and also appreciates your combined effort to return me to Chiss space, make no mistake in the fact that none of you are entirely welcome here.”

Mcgrrrr said, “I suppose that means you wouldn’t be happy if I left Bossk behind?”

“I most certainly would not,” Veeren answered coolly.

“I was jesting!” Mcgrrrr said with a chuckle. “I have every intention of releasing him from his commission as soon as we return to Republic space. But tell me, how are my pirates

STAR WARS: Curse of the Black Hole Pirates

supposed to leave when I don't even know where Chiss space is?"

"Your respective navigators have received hyperspace coordinates that will deliver you to the edge of Republic space. From there, you may rely on the data in your own navi-computers."

Groob said, "Well, *I'm* certainly eager to get going. My family and I want very much to return to Sullust." He bowed politely to Veeren, then trotted off to his saucer.

Mcgrrrr turned to Nuru and said, "How do I know you won't come chasing after us?"

"I have no quarrel with you, Mcgrrrr," Nuru replied. "Bossk, on the other hand ..."

Mcgrrrr laughed and clapped Nuru on the shoulder. "I wish you only clear skies, lad, but if the Jedi business doesn't work out for you, I hope you'll let me know." Then he leaned closer to Nuru and added, "In my humble opinion, you would make an excellent pirate."

Mcgrrrr walked off to his shuttle. Nuru looked at Veeren. He had so many things he wanted to ask her, but remembering his responsibilities as a Jedi, he chose his words carefully. "Good-bye, Aristocra. I regret that my mission to Chiss space did not go at all well, but I am relieved that the Separatists did not destroy your station, and that no Chiss lives were lost in the attack. I shall inform my superiors that Republic ships should stay out of Chiss space until you decide to renew diplomatic discussions."

Just then, the Sullustans' saucer and Mcgrrrr's shuttle rose up from the landing platform, and traveled out through the docking bay's shielded portal and into space. Nuru glanced at the departing ships, then returned his attention to Veeren.

"Good-bye, Nuru Kungurama"

Once again, Nuru noticed Veeren's upper lip sneered slightly as she said his name. He said, "Wait, Aristocra. Forgive me for asking, but I am curious ... Does my name irritate you in some way?"

Ryder Windham

Vereen stared hard at Nuru for a moment, then replied, “The Jedi did not read the data cylinder correctly.”

Confused, Nuru said, “I don’t understand.”

“You told me that a Jedi found you in a Chiss escape pod when you were an infant, and that the Jedi learned your name from a data cylinder. But your name is not Nuru Kungurama. You are Kung’urama’nuruodu of the Second Ruling Family.”

“Oh,” Nuru said. “Oh! And ... You are of the Second Ruling Family, too, and your name also ends with *nuruodo*. Does that mean we’re ... related?”

Vereen arched one eyebrow. “That is a tactless question,” she said.

Nuru did not know how to respond, but knowing that he might never see Vereen again he felt compelled to say something. “I’m sorry I don’t know Chiss protocol,” he said. “I wish we could have talked more. I realize you may not care to hear this, but ... I am glad we met.”

“I know,” Vereen said. And then she turned and walked away, heading for a door on the other side of the docking bay. The door slid open, and she stepped through it without looking back.

Nuru walked back to the *Harpy*. Seeing his approach, Breaker, Sharp, and Cleaver stepped away from the transport’s ramp. Cleaver held Ring-Sol Ambase’s lightsaber out to Nuru and said, “I neglected to return this to you earlier, Commander.”

“Thank you, Cleaver,” Nuru said as he took the weapon and clipped it to his belt beside his own lightsaber. “And I neglected to tell you that you handled yourself very well against the whuffa.”

“Thank you, sir,” Cleaver said. The droid and Breaker turned and walked up the ramp.

Nuru was about to follow when Sharp said, “One moment, Commander.” He removed his helmet and stepped closer to Nuru.

Nuru could see from his knitted brow that he was very concerned. “What’s wrong, Sharp?”

STAR WARS: Curse of the Black Hole Pirates

"I've been thinking about how we arrived at that black hole, sir," Sharp said, keeping his voice low. "I hate to say this, but I can't stop wondering if either Chatterbox or Captain Gunn had something to do with it. Maybe one of them rigged the navi-computer. Maybe both of them rigged it."

Astonished, Nuru said, "But ... why?"

"I don't know, sir," Sharp said. "But I don't think we wound up near that black hole by accident, and I believe they were the only ones who could have done the job to get us there."

Nuru shook his head. "I don't know what to say, Sharp. The facts don't add up. I mean, *why* would Gunn or Chatterbox do it? Also, they were both on the *Harpy* while we were in the Star Chamber's control station. They had nothing to do with adjusting the controls to the Infinity Gate that delivered us back here. *I* did that, though I don't know exactly how. I suppose it was an incredibly fortunate accident."

"But think about it, Commander," Sharp said. "Doesn't it seem overly coincidental that we would *accidentally* arrive near the black hole, only to encounter people who would lead you to a Star Chamber so you could *accidentally* deliver us straight back to Chiss space?"

Nuru's eyes went wide. "You think we're being manipulated?"

"I do, sir," Sharp said. "And I'd like very much to know who's pulling the strings. Meanwhile, I suggest we watch both Chatterbox and Gunn very Carefully."

"Perhaps we should confide with Breaker and Cleaver about this."

Sharp grimaced. "Now that I think of it, Breaker's awfully keen with technology. What if he's the saboteur?"

Nuru had a hard time thinking of Breaker as a suspect. "We ... we shouldn't jump to conclusions." He gestured to the landing ramp. "Come on. We'd better get aboard before the others start suspecting that *we're* up to something."

Sharp followed Nuru onto the *Harpy*. The ship lifted off to exit the docking bay, then traveled to the designated hyperspace

Ryder Windham

portal. As Gunn's transport launched into hyperspace, Nuru contemplated Sharp's concerns. And the more he thought about it, the more he began to suspect that someone was indeed manipulating the actions of the Breakout Squad.

But who?

"Nuru Kungurama and Breakout Squad successfully returned the Aristocra to Chiss space," Count Dooku said. "And with the aid of the Sullustan xenoarchaologist and Mcgrrrr's gang, they forced overseer Umbrag to retreat."

Dooku was standing in his secret lair, facing the flickering hologram of Darth Sidious that was suspended in the air before him. A dark hood concealed the upper half of Darth Sidious's face, but Dooku could clearly see his Master's lips twitch into a sick smile.

"Those ridiculous pirates and their allies served us well," Darth Sidious said. "They believed themselves cursed by the forces of a black hole that held them captive in space, never realizing that their arrival in that remote sector was *not* an accident ... never knowing the truth. It was we who cursed them."

His smile vanished. "Everything is proceeding as I have foreseen," he continued. "All of our pawns — including Nuru Kungurama — have unknowingly served us well in the years that have led up to this moment. It is only a matter of time before we form an alliance with the Chiss."

Facing the hologram, Duoku hesitated for a moment, then said, "The Trandoshan hunter's arrival near the black hole nearly disrupted our plan."

"His arrival was necessary," Darth Sidious snapped. "It was our best opportunity to introduce him to Kungurama."

Lifting his eyebrows, Dooku said, "And now that they've met?"

STAR WARS: Curse of the Black Hole Pirates

“They must meet again,” Darth Sidious replied softly. “It is only ... natural.” Then the Sith Lord leered and added, “And speaking of reunions, how is your guest?”

“He's coming around.”

“Excellent. Keep me apprised.”

“Yes, my Master,” Dooku said just before Darth Sidious's hologram vanished.

Chapter Twelve

Ring-Sol Ambase opened his eyes slowly. He felt groggy, and his throat was very dry.

He was lying on his back on an elevated pad in a dimly illuminated room with a white, octagonal ceiling. He tried to lift and turn his head, but felt pressure against the lower half of his face. Something, covered his nose and mouth.

A breath mask?

He blinked and wondered where he was. And then his mind flooded with his last memory before he had lost consciousness.

Nuru!

He had no idea how his young Padawan apprentice had wound up on board the unarmed freighter that had transported him and three squads of clone troopers to the planet Kynachi. During the transit through hyperspace, he had sensed Nuru's presence, and even informed a clone trooper named Breaker about the nagging sensation, but Breaker had assured him that no other Jedi was on the ship.

And then the freighter had arrived at Kynachi, only to be attacked by a waiting armada of Separatist warships. A few troopers were killed immediately. Ambase recalled ordering the surviving clones to go to the escape pods, and how surprised he had been — just before his own pod had jettisoned — to sense

STAR WARS: Curse of the Black Hole Pirates

Nuru again, using the Force to call out to him. But then Ambase's pod had fallen away from the shattered freighter, and beyond that, his memory was blank.

Ambase was certain that his Padawan had been on the freighter. But he had no idea whether Nuru had survived.

Where am I?

He shifted his gaze from the ceiling. He was lying on a conform pad, covered by a white blanket. Medical diagnostic machines with winking lights were on either side of him. From what he could see, he was lying in the center of an eight-walled room with a single window that offered a view of a gray sky. He was unable to see any doors, but suspected one might be set into the wall behind the head of his conform pad.

He studied the diagnostic machines again, trying to comprehend their functions. What happened? How long have I been here?

He tried to move his arms and legs. The blanket did not shift even slightly over his inert body, which seemed dead below his neck. One of the machines began beeping, and he wondered if his attempt to move had triggered an alarm of some kind. And then he became aware of a presence.

Someone had entered the room. The beeping noise continued. Ambase tried to speak, but his throat felt dry and weak.

"Please remain still, Master Ambase," a deep voice said from the unseen area behind him. "You've been through a great deal."

Ambase recognized the voice instantly. He saw a tall figure move into view to the left of his bed. His eyes went wide as he directed his gaze to the man who had once been not only a Jedi Master, but also his friend.

Dooku.

"Ring-Sol, *please*," Dooku said in an imploring tone. "I sense your anxiety, but I beg you to not move."

Because Ambase had already realized that he was immobilized, he found Dooku's plea almost amusing.

Ryder Windham

"Your pulmonary system has been damaged," Dooku continued. "I assure you that I am not responsible for your present condition, and that you are not my prisoner. I will even arrange for your immediate and safe return to the Jedi Temple, if that is what you desire. All I ask is that you allow me to explain how you arrived at my retreat."

Dooku's retreat? Ambase did not trust Dooku, but also knew he was at the man's mercy. Keeping his eyes fixed on the renegade Jedi, he took a deep, calming breath, and then another. A moment later, the nearby machine stopped beeping, indicating that Ambase's pulmonary system had stabilized.

Dooku offered a sympathetic smile. "I know you don't trust me, Ring-Sol. You believe I was wrong to leave the Jedi Order. You told me so yourself at the time." Dooku's smile melted away as his brow furrowed. "You also believe that I'm responsible for the battle on Geonosis, and for all the terrible things that have happened since. I have no illusions that you think me a turncoat and murderer."

Ambase thought, *You can't imagine what I think of you.*

Looking away from Ambase, Dooku stared at window. "I won't waste your time with further explanations for my reasons for leaving the Jedi Order, or try to convince you that it was not I who started this terrible war." Returning his gaze to Ambase, Dooku added, "If I could go back in time and change things, I would."

Dooku stepped over to the window, his elegant cape shifting behind him as he moved. Looking back at Ambase, he said, "On Geonosis, I informed Obi-Wan Kenobi that hundreds of Senators have fallen under the influence of a Sith Lord called Darth Sidious, and that the Republic is under the control of the Sith. I had evidence that Darth Sidious was in league with the Viceroy of the Trade Federation, but betrayed him. I tried to warn the Jedi Council, but they wouldn't listen to me. I sought Kenobi's help to destroy the Sith, but he refused. I wonder ... Did the Jedi Council inform you about this?"

STAR WARS: Curse of the Black Hole Pirates

Ambase remained silent.

"Forgive me," Dooku said. "I Forgot, your voice has not yet returned. I don't mean to put any strain on you, Ring-Sol, but perhaps you could blink your eyes to respond? One blink for yes, and two for no?"

Ambase willed himself to keep his eyes open. "Were you told about Darth Sidious?"

Unwilling to yield any information, Ambase Continued staring at Dooku.

Dooku frowned. "As I told Obi-Wan on Geonosis, the dark side of the Force has clouded the Council's vision. It wouldn't surprise me if they chose to remain silent about Darth Sidious."

Moving away from the window, Dooku returned to Ambase's bedside. "It was never my wish to fight the Jedi, Ring-Sol. Nor did I aspire to divide the Republic, or lead the Separarists. But in the end, if we don't choose our battles, the battles choose us. Ever since I learned of Darth Sidious, my goal has remained nothing less than to stop the Sith from conquering the galaxy. I can't do it alone."

Ambase was unable to detect whether Dooku was lying. All he could do was keep listening.

"I'm telling you all this," Dooku continued, "because I Suspect you, too, may have been betrayed, possibly by someone close to you. But I don't expect you to take my word for it. You should listen to the individual who brought you here."

Dooku nodded in the direction of the wall that Ambase could not see. Ambase heard footsteps approach, and a moment later four BX-series droid commandos escorted a dark-haired man into the chamber. From where he lay, Ambase saw that the man wore a gray tunic and that his face was that of a clone from Kamino.

Ambase could barely believe his eyes. *A clone? Is he allied with Dooku?*

"General Ambase," the clone said softly, "are you all right?"

Ryder Windham

Ambase only glared in return. The clone seemed to see the alarm in the Jedi Master's eyes, and added, "I ... I'm afraid I can't remember exactly how we got here, sir."

Dooku said, "I imagine you two have much to discuss. The droids and I shall wait outside." Dooku's cape flowed behind him as he led the droid commandos from the chamber.

Facing Ambase and keeping his voice low, the clone said, "General Ambase, I ... I realize Dooku may have recording devices in this room, but ... you need to know what's happened. Maybe you remember the explosions after our freighter arrived in Kynachi's orbit, how we went to the escape pods. Well, someone must have rigged the pods so they wouldn't eject, at least not immediately. The ones that managed to get away filled up with some kind of knockout gas. By the time I got a breath mask on you, you were already unconscious."

The clone glanced at the doorway, then continued, "Our pod made it to Kynachi, but we were captured by droids. They took you away from us and threw us in prison."

Ambase listened intently but felt himself fighting to stay awake.

"Fortunately," the clone continued, "a few troopers had evaded the droids, and they came to get us. A young Jedi was with them, identified himself as Nuru Kungurama. Said he was your apprentice. I didn't know how he arrived on Kynachi — not at the time, that is — but we were all relieved to see a Jedi. The Republic troops liberated Kynachi, sir. We tried to find you, but then ... I'm afraid something bad must have happened."

Ambase watched the clone grimace. He did not require the Force to see the man was deeply troubled.

"I remember searching for you, and then I must have blacked out." The clone shook his head, as if the motion might jog a memory. "When I came to, I had a nasty bump on the back of my head, and I was in the cockpit of a crashed Kuat transport. I have no memory at all of flying it, but I was seated behind the controls. I found you unconscious, Strapped down to a bunk in

STAR WARS: Curse of the Black Hole Pirates

the the hold. The comm system was shattered. Distress beacons had already been launched. Unfortunately, the distress beacons brought droid commandos, who captured me. But before they arrived, I also found this.”

The clone reached to his belt and removed a small cylinder. “It’s the freighter’s log, sir, the freighter that was destroyed at Kynachi. The log contains holorecordings. The droids took the log from me, along with my armor and weapons. I tried to fight them, but there were just too many. They must have handed the log over to Dooku because the next thing I knew, he showed up in my cell, asking me to explain what happened on the final holorecording. I think you should see it, sir.”

Holding the cylinder with one hand, the clone thumbed a switch and the cylinder’s top slid back to project a hologram in the air above Ambase’s outstretched form. The clone then adjusted the angle of the cylinder so Ambase could see the hologram clearly.

Dark metal walls, blinking lights ... Ambase recognized the three-dimensional image as a representation of a comm station in a narrow corridor on the freighter that had carried him and the doomed troopers to Kynachi.

A bright burst of light appeared, and a split second later, the small cylinder produced the recorded sound of an explosion. Ambase realized he was viewing the corridor at the moment the Separatists had opened fire on the freighter. He heard an unseen clone trooper cry out, and then there was another flash, followed by another explosive noise.

The recording showed a utility closet door flying open, and then the image of a young, robed boy tumbling out of the closet. The boy had blue skin and red eyes. Ambase recognized him instantly.

Nuru.

Although the clone at his bedside claimed Nuru had survived the explosion, Ambase watched in horror as the flickering image of his apprentice fell toward a holographic trooper. The trooper

Ryder Windham

reached for Nuru and shouted, “Hang, on!” Another bright light flashed, and then the hologram flickered out.

Ambase redirected his gaze at the clone who stood beside him.

“You saw where the boy was hiding, sir? That utility closet had access to the freighter’s engineering station. Forgive me for asking, General, but ... Do you think it’s possible your apprentice might have sabotaged the freighter?”

Sabotage? Nuru?!

The clone noticed Ambase’s mouth tremble under the breath mask. Ambase lifted his head slightly from the cushion as he stared hard at the trooper and gasped, “Whuh ... What ...”

A health monitor began beeping again, followed by Dooku’s voice. “Ring-Sol?”

Ambase had not even heard Dooku’s approach, but suddenly realized Dooku had already returned to his beside. Dooku said, “Perhaps we should leave you to rest.”

Ignoring Dooku, Ambase struggled to remain focused on the trooper’s face and finally managed to rasp out, “What is ... your name?”

The trooper leaned closer to Ambase’s face and said, “I’m sorry, General. I shouldn’t have expected you to remember me. We were never introduced, but I was seated across from you in the freighter on the Kynachi mission. They call me Sharp.”

Ambase winced, and then his eyes closed as his head fell back against the cushion.

Dooku glanced from Ambase to the trooper, then consulted one of the diagnostic monitors. The health monitor stopped beeping. “He’s unconscious again,” Dooku said, “but his condition remains stable. He *will* recover.” Then Dooku looked at the clone and said, “I trust you’re doing well under the circumstances?”

The clone replied, “Never better.”

Star Wars: Clone Wars
Secret Missions

Book Three
Duel at Shattered Rock

Chapter One

Cad Bane faced the two Gamorrean guards and said, "I'm here to see the Hutt."

The Gamorreans were stationed at their post, a wide, vaulted doorway that was the private entrance to their boss's headquarters on the largest asteroid in the Bilbringi system. They fixed their beady eyes on Bane and looked him over.

Bane, a blue-skinned Duros bounty hunter, had artificial breathing tubes embedded in his cheekbones and wore a broad-brimmed hat and long coat. The coat was pushed back to reveal twin blaster pistols bolstered against his thighs, and he carried an old leather satchel in his right hand. Neither Gamorrean seemed impressed by the sight of the Duros or his weapons, but Bane noticed them shift their bulky forms slightly, getting ready to swing their heavy axes at him if he made a wrong move.

Slowly, carefully, Bane lowered the satchel to the stone floor, leaving it beside his right boot. Rising to his full height, he dipped his blue fingers into a coat pocket and removed two chips of precious metal. He placed one in each hand, then slowly extended his arms so the Gamorreans could see the chips that rested in his palms.

The nearest guard glanced at the offered chips while the other kept his own gaze fixed on Bane's holstered blasters. The nearest

Ryder Windham

guard shifted his ax to his right hand, then snatched the two metal chips with his left. He lifted both chips up against the end of his broad snout. His nostrils flared as he sniffed at them. With a grunt of approval, he handed one chip to his partner, who took it greedily.

Bane smiled politely, waiting for the guards to step aside and let him pass through the doorway. Neither guard budged. The nearest guard held up his newly acquired metal chip and grunted what sounded like a question.

Bane's brow wrinkled upward. He said, "You want ... more?"

The guard nodded.

Bane's red eyes flicked to the other guard, whose jowls twisted back into a stupid grin that revealed sharp, yellow teeth. "Very well." Bane sighed. "If it's more you want..." He tilted his head back, casually distracting the guards with the small motion of his hat's brim.

Neither guard saw the bounty hunter's hands flash to his holsters or the silencer-capped blasters leap into his waiting hands. Muffled pops sounded simultaneously from both barrels as Bane fired at the center of each guard's forehead. He rapidly returned his blasters to their holsters before he launched his hands forward and yanked the guards' axes from their suddenly slack fingers. The Gamorreans teetered, then collapsed dead upon the floor.

Bane dropped to a crouch and quietly placed the axes beside the guards' bodies. He pried their fingers back and quickly recovered the valuable metal chips that he had never meant for them to keep.

Pocketing the chips, he grabbed his leather satchel, then rose and stepped over the bodies, moving fast through the vaulted doorway to enter a dark corridor.

The official designation for the asteroid was Bilbringi VII. Its primary settlement was Bilbringi Depot. Although the Bilbringi system was located along a well-traveled hyperspace route, few traveled through the asteroid-choked system unless they had

STAR WARS: Duel at Shattered Rock

business with Drixo the Hutt, who owned the depot. Bane did in fact have business to discuss with Drixo, but believed it would be best if he arrived unannounced.

Bane held his satchel as he strode forward through the corridor. As he neared the corridor's end, his olfactory glands perceived a strange oily smell—the distinctive scent of roasted two-headed Effrikim worms.

The corridor emptied into a cavernous, shadowy chamber. A ring of yellow glow rods dangled from the black-rock ceiling and illuminated a wide, circular pit at the chamber's center. Smoke trailed up from the pit along with the sound of two high voices that were singing a lullaby in Huttese. The smell of roasted worms became more pungent.

Bane had expected to encounter more guards, so he was not surprised as a dozen rushed at him from the shadows. Two guards were spear-wielding Klatooinians with olive skin and canine muzzles who jabbed at the sides of his coat. Behind Bane, an unseen guard pressed the tip of a blaster rifle's barrel up against the base of his skull. Bane had no doubt that the unseen guard was a Rodian. Only Rodians smelled that foul.

"I don't want trouble," Bane said, keeping his grip on the satchel while he raised his free hand. "I just need to see your boss."

The two singing voices stopped suddenly. A loud yawn rumbled from the pit, and then a deep, feminine voice bellowed, "An intruder? Let me see him before I have him skewered."

The Klatooinians removed Bane's blasters from their holsters and tucked the weapons into their own belts while the Rodian took the satchel. Bane slowly raised both hands in the air as the cluster of guards nudged him toward the edge of the pit.

Bane looked down and saw the singers he had heard. Two Theelin females, their pale skin mottled with crimson spots that matched their hair, snuggled against the curve of a massive Hutt's tail. The Hutt herself was a green-skinned sluglike creature with a pair of bulbous eyes and stubby-fingered arms. She was nestled

Ryder Windham

beside a portable cooker, over which an assortment of two-headed worms sizzled on a slowly rotating spit.

The Hutt tilted her head back and gazed lazily at Bane. "Unless you have a remarkably good explanation for breaking into my private quarters and interrupting my snack time, I'll be eating Duros steaks for dinner."

Bane kept his hands raised. "I am a courier," he drawled. "Hired to bring one thousand peggats to Drixo the Hutt. The money is in the satchel that the Rodian took from me."

"Peggats?" Drixo's eyes glittered in the light of the glow rods. "Inspect the satchel!"

Bane heard a shuffling sound from behind, and then the Rodian moved up beside him at the edge of the pit. Facing Drixo, the Rodian said, "The bag's full of peggats, Your Hugeness."

Drixo looked at Bane. "I suppose that's how you got in here? By bribing my Gamorreans?"

Bane shrugged. "Good help is hard to find."

"Who hired you?" Drixo said suspiciously. "And what exactly does your employer want from me?"

"My client wishes to remain anonymous." Extending his fingers to gesture at the walls and ceiling, Bane said, "He wants to purchase Bilbringi Depot."

Drixo laughed. "My property is worth more than one thousand peggats. Much more."

"My client is very determined ... and very generous. If you name your price, I am sure he will—"

"Your client means nothing to me. My asteroid is not for sale."

"I see," Bane said. "In that case, I shall take my satchel and leave you in peace."

Drixo sighed. "You may leave, but with an empty satchel. The peggats stay with me."

Hmm. Bane grimaced. "I don't think my employer will like that very much."

STAR WARS: Duel at Shattered Rock

“He doesn’t really have a choice. Nor do you.” Drixo bit off both heads of a roasted worm. “Consider yourself lucky that I don’t order my men to flay you alive from here to the Comra system, and then do something really awful to you.”

Drixo’s guards had a good laugh at this. Bane glanced at the two Theelin and saw they were laughing, too. He wondered if the Theelin laughed out of fear or loyalty to their Hutt master. Returning his gaze to Drixo, he said, “Perhaps there is another possibility. Perhaps I might . . .”

“Yes?” Drixo said impatiently. “You might what?”

“Kill everyone in the room.”

A roar of blaster fire exploded from the entrance of the corridor behind Bane. Having followed the Duros’s path, three IG-86 sentinel droids with cylindrical, drumlike heads and lean, gray-metal bodies lurched into the chamber with their weapons blazing, spraying energy bolts at every life-form above Drixo’s pit except for Cad Bane.

Bane stepped back from the edge of the pit and watched his sentinel droids mow down the guards. The Rodian squeezed off a single shot of return fire before a droid cut him in half. The two Klatooinians were so distracted by the sneak attack that they did not notice Bane reach to their belts to retrieve his blaster pistols. Bane fired two precise shots at point-blank range. Both Klatooinians dropped their spears and crumpled to the floor.

The sentinel droids stopped firing. Bane’s red eyes swept over the chamber to confirm all the guards were dead before he returned to the edge of the pit. He aimed one blaster at Drixo’s head and the other in the general direction of the two Theelin.

Seeing Bane’s blaster, both Theelin hissed loudly as they reached for their own concealed weapons, a matching pair of curved-blade throwing knives. One Theelin managed to fling her knife up at Bane, and the other was about to do the same, but Bane—realizing the Theelin were loyal to Drixo—ducked fast and let his blaster spit twice. The thrown knife whined past

Ryder Windham

Bane's head at the same moment that both Theelin dropped and flopped against the Hutt's tail.

Drixo looked at the bodies slumped beside her. Lifting her gaze to meet Bane's, she said, "You didn't have to kill my pets."

"And they didn't have to throw knives at me," Bane answered dryly as the three sentinel droids moved up beside him. "All your guards are dead, Drixo. Most unfortunate. If only you had not insisted on keeping Bilbringi Depot." He gave a slight nod to the three droids. The droids aimed their own blasters at the Hutt in the bottom of the pit.

"Wait!" Drixo said. "I ... I will gladly sell Bilbringi Depot to you!"

"Sell?" Bane shook his head. "Sorry, Drixo. I should have told you. The peggats were a one-time-only offer. My client was most insistent about that."

"Did I say sell?" Drixo said. "Sorry, I meant to say I will gladly give Bilbringi Depot—and the entire asteroid—to you."

"Really?"

"Yes! You can take everything!"

"But I already have," Bane said. "Fire at will."

The droids obeyed as usual.

"Bilbringi Depot is secured," Cad Bane reported.

"You have done well, bounty hunter," said the Sith Lord Darth Sidious. With his hooded head facing the hologram projector, he was seated in his secret lair in an industrial district of skyscrapers on Coruscant. As the flickering three dimension of image of Bane returned to his gaze, he continued, "I trust you left no evidence of your work."

"I never leave a mess unless I'm paid to leave a mess," Bane replied curtly. "I'm a professional."

"Payment has been transferred to your account. I shall contact you when I next require your services." Darth Sidious broke the connection, and Bane's hologram vanished. He pressed

STAR WARS: Duel at Shattered Rock

a button on the communications console, and a different hologram appeared before him.

The hologram represented Count Dooku, a former Jedi Master who had become the leader of the Separatists and the Confederacy of Independent Systems. An older man with a piercing gaze and immaculately groomed beard and mustache, Dooku was secretly Darth Sidious's Sith apprentice, Darth Tyranus. Dooku's hologram bowed, then said, "What is thy bidding, my Master?"

"We have Bilbringi Depot. Is the Techno Union ready to transport ship-building materials?"

"Yes, my Master. I shall contact Overseer Umbrag and instruct him to deliver the materials to Bilbringi immediately."

"And what of your captive Jedi?"

"Ring-Sol Ambase is still recovering. But he will soon be ready to carry out the next step of our venture."

"Excellent."

"All is proceeding as you have foreseen," Dooku said with admiration. "Republic forces have liberated the planet Kynachi and established tentative diplomatic relations with Chiss space. Bilbringi Depot is ours, and the once neutral Kynachi intends to ally with the Republic."

"And as we speak," Darth Sidious added, "Langu Sommilor, a representative from Kynachi, is bound for Coruscant. His ship is scheduled to refuel on the planet Vaced. And not by coincidence, the freighter that carries Nuru Kungurama and Breakout Squad is traveling the same hyperspace route. It would be advantageous to have Kungurama and Sommilor meet on Vaced."

Dooku smiled. "Our plans for Bilbringi can be accelerated."

"Kungurama's visit to Vaced should be ... unfortunate."

"Master, this is a perfect opportunity to enlist our associates on Mandalore."

"Yes," Darth Sidious hissed. "Yes. Contact the Death Watch. Tell them you require their best sniper."

Chapter Two

Holding a battle club high over his broad head, the stony-muscled monster with a face in the middle of his torso dodged the long-limbed desert-predator's spear as he jumped over a small four-legged creature's spiked tail to land beside a giant savage with leathery skin and a snakelike head. The snake-head savage turned fast and seized the monster's club. The furious monster tried to grab its club back but stumbled into the waiting claws of a vicious beast with a lashing tail.

Then the hulking savage did the unthinkable and swung the stolen club at his own ally, a hook-nosed insectoid. The powerful swing sent the insectoid flying into the clawed beast, which shrieked before it vanished, along with the insectoid and the stony-muscled monster, from the hologame table. "That's against the rules!" said the clone trooper Knuckles as he slammed his bare fist onto the edge of the game table, making the smaller holographic monsters jump. "You're not supposed to steal weapons and sacrifice your own holomonsters to win like ... like that!"

"I made a fair move," replied the reprogrammed droid commando named Cleaver. "Screaming about it won't help you."

"But you can't!"

STAR WARS: Duel at Shattered Rock

“Sir, I admit I possess only rudimentary knowledge of the game dejarik,” Cleaver said patiently, “but I believe the combination of the tri-sector sidestep and the carnivore volley is entirely acceptable according to the rules in the Corellian edition of *Dejarik for Amateurs and Children*”

Knuckles and Cleaver were seated on opposite sides of the hologame table in the main hold of the *Hasty Harpy*, a Corellian YT-1760 transport that was presently traveling through hyperspace along the Namadii Corridor, on course for the planet Coruscant. On the other side of the hold, the *Harpy*'s captain, Lalo Gunn, sat beside the clone trooper Chatterbox. Gunn was teaching Chatterbox how to play sabacc, a card game. Hearing Cleaver's remarks, Gunn chuckled and said, “Tough luck, Knuckles. You just got beaten by a droid.”

Knuckles tapped the hologame table with his index finger. “Care for a rematch. Cleaver?”

“If it would please you, sir.”

“Hang on, you two,” interrupted another clone, Breaker, who was hunkered in front of a nearby engineering console's lower access cabinet. “Don't start the next game until Sharp and I finish this systems check.” He glanced up at Sharp, who stood beside him. “Press the three switches now.”

“Okay,” said Sharp. He pressed the switches and held them in place. Like Knuckles, Chatterbox, and Breaker, Sharp was not wearing his helmet at the moment. All four men were identical and resembled Jango Fett, the notorious bounty hunter who had served as the genetic template for the Kaminoan-produced clone soldiers of the Republic Army.

Breaker looked away from the console's cabinet to face the *Harpy*'s one remaining passenger, a boy with red eyes, blue skin, and black hair. Breaker said, “We should be done in a moment, Commander.”

The young Jedi Nuru Kungurama, a Chiss who had been raised in the Jedi Temple on Coruscant, responded with a nod. Seated with his back against a padded bulkhead, Nuru maintained

Ryder Windham

a passive expression as he watched the others. But his mind was hardly relaxed.

Nuru had never imagined he would find himself in command of a squad of Republic clone troopers fighting Separatist forces on distant worlds. But ever since he had left the Temple to follow his Master, Ring-Sol Ambase, on a secret mission to the planet Kynachi, his life had taken many unexpected turns.

Becoming separated from his Master in orbit of Kynachi. Meeting the former smuggler Lalo Gunn just before they encountered a mysterious Duros bounty hunter. Learning that the Techno Union had conquered Kynachi and secretly occupied the world for a decade. The destruction of Gunn's navigation droid, Teejay, whose brain was utilized for the construction of Cleaver. The formation of Breakout Squad. Fighting the Separatist Overseer Umbrag and his Techno Union droids. The liberation of Kynachi. The recovery of Ambase's lightsaber.

What happened to my Master?

And then the mission to distant Chiss space, and Nuru's first encounter with another Chiss. The sneak attack by Overseer Umbrag. The bizarre encounter with the Black Hole Pirates ...

How did we wind up near that uncharted black hole?

Sharp had confided that he suspected their unexpected detour to the black hole sector had not been an accident—that an unknown enemy might be manipulating their movements across the galaxy. Even more troubling, Sharp surmised that the *Harpy's* navi-computer had been rigged to alter the ship's course. And if Sharp was right...

We may have a traitor on board.

Because clone troopers were engineered to serve and obey their Jedi leaders, Nuru had a hard time with the idea that any of the clones could be traitors. As for Lalo Gunn, he could not imagine any reason why she would have deliberately flown her ship to that wretched black hole sector.

Are we really being manipulated? Is someone playing a dangerous game using us as pawns?

STAR WARS: Duel at Shattered Rock

A fresh set of holomonsters appeared on the table before Knuckles and Cleaver. Knuckles said, "Hey, Breaker. When you refurbished Cleaver's brain, you didn't program him to be a dejarik grandmaster, did you?"

Breaker shook his head. "No, but Cleaver's a fast learner."

"Just my luck," Knuckles muttered as one of Cleaver's holomonsters began clobbering another.

Nuru was struck by a sudden thought. *If Breaker is a traitor, could he have reprogrammed Cleaver to tamper with the navi-computer? What if—?*

Nuru's musings were interrupted by a loud beep. All eyes turned to the main hold's comm.

"That's the hypercomm signal," Gunn said. She tossed down her cards and went to the comm. "Someone's hailing us." She looked at Breaker and Sharp. "I switched off the hyperspace transponder so no one could track us. Did either of you clowns activate it?"

"No," Breaker said as he stepped beside Gunn. Pointing to the comm's data display, he looked to Nuru and said, "Commander, we're receiving an emergency transmission from Coruscant."

Nuru leaned forward on his seat and said, "Open it."

Gunn pressed a button on the console. Two low-resolution holograms materialized in the air above the comm. Everyone in the *Harpy's* hold recognized the flickering images as Jedi General Yoda and Supreme Chancellor Palpatine.

"Uh, Captain Gunn here," Gunn said sheepishly, not sure how she should address either the Jedi Master or the elected leader of the Galactic Republic.

As Nuru rose to his feet, he felt a clinking sound at his hip. He kept forgetting that he now had two lightsabers—his Master's as well as his own—clipped to his belt. Bowing slightly at the holograms, he said, "Master Yoda. Chancellor Palpatine."

"Ah, Nuru Kungurama," Palpatine's voice crackled. "Thank goodness my pilots were able to locate Captain Gunn's ship. We

Ryder Windham

knew it was likely you'd return to Coruscant by the Namadii Corridor."

Nuru suspected he was about to be questioned about the mission to Chiss space. He said, "I regret my meeting with the Chiss ambassador was not very successful, Chancellor. We—"

"That discussion will have to wait," Palpatine interrupted.

"A new concern, we have," Yoda added.

Palpatine gestured to his left, and a hologram of another man materialized. Palpatine said, "Allow me to introduce Commissioner Langu Sommilor, a representative of Kynachi."

Sommilor appeared as a lean man with thinning gold hair. "Greetings, Nuru Kungurama. I'm sorry you left Kynachi before I could personally thank you for bringing an end to the Techno Union's ten-year occupation of my world."

"You give me too much credit, Commissioner. Without my companions, I could not have ..." Nuru's words caught in his throat. Forgetting all protocol, he said, "Master Yoda, has Master Ambase been found?"

Yoda's hologram appeared to shudder slightly. "Still lost, Ambase is."

Sommilor added, "I have many volunteers looking for Ambase on Kynachi, but so far we have found no sign of him."

Palpatine said, "Young Kungurama, be assured we are making every effort to locate your Master. He will be found."

Nuru frowned. He was unable to hide his disappointment.

"The reason for this communication," Palpatine continued, "is to inform you that Commissioner Sommilor is also traveling the Namadii Corridor. Kynachi intends to ally with the Republic, and the commissioner is coming to Coruscant for a special meeting with the Senate. Unfortunately, Republic Intelligence has reason to believe the Techno Union will attempt to stop the commissioner from reaching his destination. The Jedi Council informed me that no Jedi were readily available to escort the commissioner, but then I thought we might manage to contact you before you returned to Coruscant."

STAR WARS: Duel at Shattered Rock

Turning to Yoda's hologram, Palpatine added brightly, "It's remarkable how things worked out, isn't it?"

"Hurmm," Yoda muttered without enthusiasm.

Sommilor said, "I'm traveling in a Suwantek Systems freighter that will be refueling on the planet Vaced in approximately six standard hours. Can you and your squad meet me there, and then escort me to Coruscant?"

Nuru looked at Gunn. Gunn said, "Last I checked the navi-computer, Vaced was still ahead of us, less than five hours away. We could get there before the commissioner."

Returning his attention to Sommilor's hologram, Nurū said, "I am at your service, Commissioner,"

"Thank you again, Nurū Kungurama. I look forward to meeting you on Vaced."

Palpatine smiled. "And I look forward to meeting you *all* upon your arrival at Coruscant. And, Nurū, I greatly anticipate your full report about the Chiss ambassador."

Yoda nodded to Nurū. "May the Force be with you and your allies." The holograms flickered off.

Rising from the hologame table, Knuckles stretched his arms. "Well, so much for our recreation hour." He shut down the game. "Better luck next time, Cleaver."

"But I was winning again," Cleaver said as the holomonsters vanished.

Knuckles looked at the comm console. "Good timing on the chancellor's part, wasn't it?"

Nuru said, "What do you mean?"

"If the chancellor and General Yoda had contacted us later, we might have already passed Vaced. We would have had to exit hyperspace at some other point on the Namadii Corridor and then double back to Vaced to meet the commissioner."

Chatterbox cleared his throat, then said, "I have a bad feeling about this."

Everyone looked at Chatterbox. Gunn said, "What are you jabbering about?"

Ryder Windham

The usually silent trooper cleared his throat again. "General Ambase was lost on Kynachi. We're traveling through hyperspace with you, Ambase's apprentice. A ship from Kynachi is trailing us on the same hyperlane. Both ships are bound for Coruscant." Chatterbox shook his head. "Too many coincidences."

Gunn scowled. "That's the most words I've heard out of you. Ever."

Ignoring Gunn, Nuru said, "You think we're being set up?"

Chatterbox nodded.

"But who's pulling the strings?" Knuckles said with a broad shrug. "If it's Overseer Umbrag and his Techno Union cronies, they've been doing a sloppy job. We defeated them at Kynachi *and* helped chase them out of Chiss space. So who else could be messing with us?"

Breaker was watching a scope on the comm board as he responded, "Probably whoever planted a tracking device on the *Harpy*."

"Huh?" Gunn said. "What tracking device?"

"Look here," Breaker said, gesturing to the scope. Nuru and Gunn moved closer to view the data display for the *Harpy's* communications systems. "Watch for the blip."

Gunn said, "I don't see any—"

"Wait," Breaker said. A moment later, a tiny green circle flashed on the data display. "That's the third blip in the past minute. It's an intermittent broadcast signal. I can't pinpoint the source, but it's definitely coming from somewhere on the *Harpy*."

"Well, I'll be fried," Gunn muttered.

Knuckles tapped the side of his head. Looking at Nuru, he said, "The Black Hole Pirates. Maybe they slapped the tracker on us."

"Here's another possibility," Breaker said. "Maybe the Techno Union planted tracking devices on every grounded starship during the occupation of Kynachi. If that happened, they could be tracking Commissioner Sommilor as well as us."

STAR WARS: Duel at Shattered Rock

“Also by tuning into our transmissions,” added Gunn. “Blast! That could explain how Umbrag wound up following us straight to Chiss space.”

Nuru said, “According to the chancellor. Republic Intelligence believes the Techno Union will try to stop Sommilor, but...” Nuru shook his head. “I’m not convinced the Techno Union is responsible for the transmitter. Like Knuckles pointed out, if they’re trying to manipulate us, they don’t seem to be doing a good job.”

Knuckles said, “Should we send a warning to the commissioner?”

“No,” Nuru replied. “Not unless we can determine that it’s safe. Tracking devices might not have been the only thing planted. For all we know, sending a warning transmission could trigger a concealed explosive.”

Breaker asked, “How do you want to proceed, Commander?”

“We’re going to carry out our orders and see this mission through. And we’re going to be very, very careful. Breaker, you’ll reset the navi-computer to exit hyperspace at Vaced. The rest of us will search the ship’s interior for the tracking device.”

“But what if the transmitter isn’t inside the *Harpy*?” Gunn asked. “What if it’s on the hull?”

“Then we’ll search the hull after we land on Vaced.”

Breaker exited the hold and went to reset the navi-computer. Nuru said, “Sharp and Chatterbox, you search the starboard hold and maintenance bays. Knuckles and Cleaver, you cover the port side. I’ll look here, and Gunn will look aft.”

“Excuse me, Commander,” Cleaver said. “What does a tracking device look like?”

“It could be a small box or compact case, probably with a magnetic back so it can be easily attached to a bulkhead or other surface. It might be camouflaged.”

Cleaver looked up at the maintenance access hatch on the ceiling and said, “I have found something.”

Ryder Windham

“Really?” Nuru asked. “What is it?” Cleaver reached up and grasped a metal box that was magnetically secured to the hatch’s frame. Pulling the box away from the frame, he said, “Is this the transmitter?”

Gunn laughed. “No, Cleaver. That’s a tool kit. See?” Taking the box from the droid, she slid back the box’s lid to show him the tools inside.

“Oh,” Cleaver said. Gunn sealed the tool kit and placed it back up against the frame.

“Come on, Cleaver,” Knuckles said. He headed out of the main hold with the droid at his heels.

Chatterbox, Sharp, and Gunn exited the hold, leaving Nuru behind. As Nuru began searching every nook of the nearest bulkhead for a bidden transmitter, more thoughts raced through his head. *Maybe there isn’t a traitor on board. Maybe some devious enemy was somehow responsible for sending us to the black hole sector. Maybe...*

Maybe I have absolutely no idea who I can trust anymore.

Nuru sighed. He wished he could ask someone for guidance. He touched the second lightsaber at his belt.

What would Master Ambase do if he were here right now?

And then Nuru swallowed hard. Ever since leaving Kynachi, he had held firmly to his belief that Ring-Sol Ambase was still alive. But now, as the *Hasty Harpy* carried him toward an increasingly uncertain future, he wondered if Ambase might really be gone forever.

Chapter Three

“Ring-Sol?” said Count Dooku. “Can you hear me?”

The Jedi Master Ring-Sol Ambase was lying on an elevated pad in the makeshift medical chamber, an eight-walled room with a single window. He opened his eyes to see Count Dooku, the former Jedi and current leader of the Separatists, standing at his bedside.

A dark-haired clone trooper wearing a gray tunic with matching pants and black slip-on shoes stood against one wall. Two super battle droids were positioned on either side of the clone, their blasters aimed at his torso.

Dooku smiled at Ambase and said, “Good morning, old friend.”

Ambase’s eyes shifted to the window, which offered a view of the same gray sky he had seen earlier, the last time he was conscious. “Morning?” he muttered, and immediately realized that a breath mask no longer covered the lower half of his face. “Where?”

“Still at my retreat in the Bogden system,” Dooku said. “You’ve been here for over a week.”

Memories crashed like waves through Ambase’s mind. The destruction of his freighter in orbit of the planet Kynachi. Blacking out in a gas-filled escape pod that also carried five clone

Ryder Windham

troopers. Awakening in the eight-walled room with Dooku. The clone trooper who claimed he and Ambase had become separated on Kynachi, and also that he had no memory of finding Ambase or leaving Kynachi. The holorecording that appeared to confirm Ambase's Padawan apprentice, Nuru Kungurama, had been a stowaway on the doomed freighter.

Ambase cleared his throat. "Dooku ... what do you want?"

"You are not my prisoner, Ring-Sol. I only brought you here because you needed help desperately." He gestured to the medical regulators and diagnostic machines on the other side of the bed. "All readings indicate your pulmonary system has improved."

"You kept me ... alive?"

"Perhaps you don't remember, but I did promise your safe return to the Jedi Temple. However, you are hardly fit to travel. I believe it would be best if you remained here for a few more days."

Ambase had no reason to believe Dooku was telling the truth. He kept his expression neutral.

Dooku patted Ambase's shoulder. "When you are strong enough, a nonmilitary transport will be waiting to deliver you to Coruscant. But, Ring-Sol ... I hope you understand that no one is safe in the Republic. You remember what I told you about Darth Sidious?"

"Yes," Ambase rasped. "I ... remember." In fact, Dooku's assertion that a Sith Lord named Darth Sidious was controlling members of the Senate had not been news to Ambase. Like other Jedi Masters, he had reviewed Obi-Wan Kenobi's report about Dooku and the Battle of Geonosis. And like Obi-Wan, Ambase could only guess whether Dooku was lying.

"And you also recall the holorecording?" Dooku continued. "The one this trooper recovered from the freighter that was destroyed at Kynachi?" Dooku gave a slight nod toward the captive clone.

STAR WARS: Duel at Shattered Rock

Ambase glanced at the clone. "You told me your name is ... Sharp?"

The clone responded with a nod.

Dooku said, "While the recording presented no proof that your apprentice sabotaged the freighter before it reached Kynachi, it is my understanding that you were unaware he had concealed himself in a utility closet near the engineering station. Evidently, he not only survived the ship's destruction, but assumed command of your troops."

Ambase wondered whether the clone had talked too much to Dooku. He shot a glance at the clone. The clone grimaced.

Dooku shook his head sadly. "I cannot imagine any good explanation for Nuru Kungurama's actions and I admit I fear the worst. The Sith Lords *are* manipulating the Jedi Order as well as the Senate. We have to allow the possibility that the Sith have turned Jedi apprentices against their own Masters."

Nuru? In league with the Sith? Despite Ambase's Jedi training to suppress emotions, he felt a rush of outrage at Dooku for suggesting the possibility.

Dooku placed his hand gently on Ambase's shoulder. "By the Force, I hope Nuru is innocent of any wrongdoing. For if he is not ..." Dooku withdrew His hand. "Make no mistake of my goals in this war, Ring-Sol. The Sith must be destroyed."

Hearing this, Ambase felt something even more unexpected. A small stab of fear.

"It recently came to my attention," Dooku continued, "that Nuru has seized Bilbringi Depot. It may be just a rumor, but ..." Distracted, he looked to the room's only doorway and saw a small droid with an antennae extending from the top of its head waddling into the room. The droid came to a stop before Dooku.

"Excuse me. Master," the droid said. "Your presence is required on Landing Pad three." The small droid then turned around and waddled out.

Dooku backed away from Ambase's bed. "I have to attend to a tiny matter, and then I shall also prepare a transport so you may

Ryder Windham

depart when you wish.” He signaled the super battle droids, who stepped away from the clone and filed quickly out of the room. As the droids clanked away, Dooku faced the clone and added, “You may remain with your commander, but the droids will be just outside.” And then Dooku strode off, his cape flowing like a dark wave behind him.

The clone watched the doorway and listened for a moment, then raised one hand to casually pinch his earlobe. Ambase had no difficulty comprehending the clone’s gesture. *The Separatists are probably listening.*

Ambase studied the clone’s swarthy features. The clone was identical to the others in the Republic’s army. Despite the clone’s appearance, Ambase silently questioned his identity and origin.

Can clones be brainwashed? Can they lie? Or is this man even a clone? Could he be a surgically altered Separatist impostor? The Jedi could not think of any way to prove the man had been a member of the ill-fated task force sent to Kynachi, let alone that he was the trooper named Sharp.

Ambase looked to the window. “We’re in the Bogden system?”

“I can’t say for certain, sir,” the clone replied. He moved to the window and rapped his knuckles against it, “Feels strong, like transparisteel.” Transparisteel was a completely transparent metal alloy commonly used for starship viewports as well as windows for buildings that required heavy security.

“What’s outside?”

“Landing pads. Three ships. It’s raining hard. I think one ship is Dooku’s solar sailer. Another looks like the Kuat transport that we were in when the battle droids found us. It appears some astromech droids are repairing it now.”

“What about the third ship?”

“I don’t have a clear view of it, sir. Too much rain.”

Ambase flexed the fingers of his right hand. “I don’t suppose you’ve seen my lightsaber? Or my utility belt?”

STAR WARS: Duel at Shattered Rock

"No, sir. Like I told you earlier... One moment I was searching for you on Kynachi. The next thing I know, I'm waking up behind the controls of a crashed transport with a bump on the back of my head. I found you unconscious, strapped into a bunk in the hold. Then the droid commandoes arrived." The clone rubbed the back of his head. "If the droids took your lightsaber, I didn't see them do it."

"How did we get from the crashed transport to this place? Spacecraft?"

"No, sir. The droids brought us here directly in an airspeeder."

Still looking out the window, Ambase said, "Of all the worlds in the galaxy, we somehow wound up on one where Count Dooku has a hideout."

The clone rubbed the back of his head again. "If only I could remember what happened on Kynachi."

Ambase looked at the clone. "I hope you haven't been ... mistreated."

"No, sir. The droids have me in a nearby cell. They tried questioning me, but I didn't talk."

"But Dooku learned Nuru was at Kynachi."

The clone grimaced again. "I didn't tell him, sir. The Separatists got our freighter's log when they captured me. When Dooku viewed the log's holorecordings, he recognized Kungurama immediately."

Ambase smiled. "I would have been more surprised if Dooku had not recognized Nuru, and not just because Nuru is so distinctive." Ambase returned his gaze to the window. "Eleven years ago, when I found the boy in an escape pod at the edge of Wild Space ... Dooku was with me."

"Dooku was still a Jedi then?"

"That's right."

The clone was about to ask another question when a clanking sound indicated the droids were about to reenter the chamber.

Ryder Windham

Speaking in a rushed whisper, Ambase said, “You have to get us out of here.”

“I’m working on it, sir,” the clone replied, just as the droids walked in.

A heavy rain was falling as Count Dooku stepped out of his castle, a spired structure perched atop a mountain on the Bogden moon Kohlma. In one hand, Dooku carried Ambase’s utility belt. As he proceeded to the starship landing pads, a disc-shaped repulsorlift device traveled through the air above his head, projecting a thin energy shield to deflect the rain from his body.

Dooku walked past his own solar sailer, which rested on Landing Pad one, and also past the next pad, where a team of astromech droids was busily repairing a Kuat *Corona*-class transport. On the third landing pad was a MandalMotors *Pursuer*-class enforcement ship, a thick, wedge-shaped vessel attached to a distinctive port-side outrigger that housed a powerful maneuvering thruster cluster.

A man clad in gray-and-blue segmented blast-resistant armor stood motionless beside the enforcement ship, waiting for Dooku. The man had a long-barreled sniper rifle slung over one shoulder, a pair of blaster pistols in cross-draw holsters on his belt, and a jetpack secured across his back. The jetpack was armed with an antivehicle homing missile. The man’s head was completely obscured by a T-visored helmet, the distinctive mask of a Mandalorian Warrior.

Seeing the Mandalorian, Dooku was reminded of a meeting on Kohlma that had occurred over a decade earlier, when he had recruited Jango Fett as the template for the now-thriving clone army. As Dooku recalled, it had been raining then, too.

Without breaking his stride, Dooku pushed his cape back, moved his hand to a leather pouch at his belt, and released three small silver orbs into the air. The orbs made simultaneous popping sounds as they burst through Dooku’s personal energy field. Powered by miniature repulsorlift engines, each orb raced

STAR WARS: Duel at Shattered Rock

off in a different direction and rapidly ascended high into the rainy sky.

And then the orbs circled back, descending fast toward the Mandalorian. The armored man's gloved hands whipped to his belt and seized his pistols just as one orb opened fire. He ignored the incoming stream of energy bolts that whizzed past his form as he fired a single shot, his pistol making a barely audible *puff*. The first orb shattered in midair.

The second orb fired from behind. The Mandalorian spun on his left foot and dropped to a crouch as he raised his other pistol. Energy bolts tore into the ground where he had just been standing as he returned fire with another single shot. The orb exploded.

The third orb scored a glancing hit on the Mandalorian's shoulder plate as it sped straight toward him. The Mandalorian plunged his pistols back into their holsters, then reached for his rifle. Gripping the rifle's barrel, he swung hard at the approaching orb. The rifle's butt slammed into the orb, sending a spray of small metal bits across the landing pad.

"Impressive," Dooku said as he came to a stop before the Mandalorian. "You come highly recommended by your leader. I am grateful that he agreed to my request for assistance from the Death Watch, and I appreciate that you traveled to Kohlma so swiftly."

The Mandalorian slung his rifle back over his shoulder. His name was Hudu Shiv, but he had no reason to make introductions. "The Death Watch Command said you have an assignment for me." His low voice sounded like a restrained growl as it rattled through the filter of his helmet's built-in speaker.

Dooku drew a compact holoprojector from his pocket. He activated holoprojector to display a three-dimensional image of a lead man with thinning hair. "Commissioner Langu Sommilor, a representative of Kynachi, is currently en route to a meeting with the Galactic Senate on Coruscant. My sources have

Ryder Windham

informed me that Sommilor's ship will be refueling at the main spaceport on Vaced in approximately six standard hours." Dooku thumbed a switch on the holo projector, and the hologram of Sommilor was replaced by an image of Sommilor's angular Suwantek Systems freighter. "Sommilor will rendezvous on Vaced with a Jedi who leads a squad of four Republic clone troopers." Dooku thumbed the switch again, and the hologram of the ship was replaced by the image of a blue-skinned boy with red eyes. "This Jedi, Nuru Kungurama, has been assigned to escort Sommilor to Coruscant."

Studying the hologram, Shiv said, "The Jedi is a child?"

"At any age, a Jedi is a Jedi," Dooku said. Kungurama is not to be underestimated. He switched off the holoprojector and handed it to the warrior. "I have promised your leader that the day will soon come when the Death Watch will reclaim Mandalore from the cowards who have assumed power, and that you will have all the support of the Separatist forces. But for now, it is too soon to reveal the return of the Death Watch, or to allow the Galactic Senate to suspect a Mandalorian warrior is at large. Secrecy is essential to this assignment."

The Mandalorian did not waste words. "Who do you want me to kill?"

Dooku smiled. He told the Mandalorian exactly what he wanted done on Vaced. As he spoke, he handed Ambase's utility belt to the Mandalorian. When he was finished issuing instructions, he said, "Happy hunting." And then he turned and began walking back to his castle, taking his personal rain-deflector along with him.

The Mandalorian boarded his enforcement ship and sealed the hatch. Standing upon the airlock's grated floor, he hit a wall switch to activate a ring of decontamination nozzles that instantly spray-cleaned and dried his armor. He proceeded to the cockpit. Seconds later the ship's engines ignited, sending a blast of steam into the rainfall behind the thrusters.

STAR WARS: Duel at Shattered Rock

As the ship lifted off and ascended through the clouds, Shiv was confident that he would deliver death to Vaced.

Chapter Four

Umbrag's bulky Metalorn yacht dropped out of hyperspace at the outer edge of the Bilbringi system. The yacht's bow resembled a three-pronged fork. The rest of the vessel looked like a long box with blisters of automatic laser cannons. A moment after the yacht's arrival, six immense drone barges also exited hyperspace to materialize just behind the yacht.

"Scanning now," said one of the two droids at the navigational controls on the yacht's bridge. "No sign of any enemy vessels."

"Keep scanning for *any* vessels other than ours," said Umbrag from behind his breath mask. Clad in an armored pressure suit, the green-skinned humanoid Skakoan pushed himself out of his command seat and moved beside the droid pilot. His beady eyes squinted behind his metal-rimmed goggles as he peered through the main viewport. "Just look at all those asteroids out there. Must be thousands of them."

"Yes, sir," the pilot droid said.

Umbrag scowled. "I had everything under control on Kynachi until that Jedi brat came along."

"I know that you did, sir," the droid said sympathetically.

"And then, after I'd seized that space station at the edge of Wild Space, I was attacked by pirates!"

STAR WARS: Duel at Shattered Rock

"I remember, sir," the droid said. "I was there, too."

"Count Dooku has assured me that we won't encounter any trouble at Bilbringi Depot, but I'm not taking any chances. The barges are carrying enough construction materials to build a small fleet of warships. The Techno Union can't afford to lose them."

"Of course not, sir."

"I just wish Dooku had sent more than twelve battle droids on this assignment."

"I do to, sir."

"I don't know why I should have to wait a full week for reinforcements. Still no sign of any other vessels?"

"No, sir."

"Plot a course through the asteroid field."

"Yes, sir." The pilot extended an interface arm that he jacked into the yacht's navi-computer while his metal fingers tapped at other controls. Turning to his copilot, he said, "Direct the barges to follow our lead, and set the laser cannons for stray asteroids."

The copilot tapped at more controls. "Barges are set. Laser cannons ready."

Umbrag said, "Take us in."

The yacht moved into the asteroid field, trailed by the drone barges. As they headed toward the largest asteroid, two smaller asteroids with eccentric orbits tumbled toward the yacht. The laser cannons fired. As both asteroids were immediately reduced to space dust, the copilot cried out, "Take *that*, Republic dogs!"

The pilot droid looked at the copilot. "Those were asteroids, not Republic dogs."

"I know," said the copilot. "But if they had been Republic dogs, I would have liked to blow them up just like that, and—"

"Quiet!" Umbrag roared.

Several minutes later, the yacht and barges arrived at Bilbringi Depot. Umbrag peered through the viewport to see the cluster of landing pads, modular structures, and docking bays that clung to the surface of the enormous asteroid. Although bright lights illuminated the landing and docking areas and evidenced that at

Ryder Windham

least some of the depot's generators were running, there was no visible activity.

The pilot droid said, "The depot looks abandoned, sir."

"No, not abandoned," Umbrag said. "According to Count Dooku, it was, until recently, owned by a Hutt who donated it to the Separatist cause."

"Really?" said the droid. "I've never heard of a Hutt donating anything to anyone."

Umbrag sighed.

"Something wrong, sir?"

"I miss Kynachi," Umbrag said sadly. Raising his gloved hand, he made a fist. "If I ever get ahold of that meddlesome Jedi, I'll squeeze his neck until his blue head pops off."

"Watch your head, kid!" Gunn said as Nuru entered the *Hasty Harpy's* cockpit. "Better buckle up. We're exiting hyperspace in five minutes."

Nuru belted himself into the rear seat behind Gunn and Chatterbox. Outside the cockpit's transparisteel windows, hyperspace appeared as a torrential cascade of brilliant lights. Gunn glanced back at Nuru and said, "When we leave hyperspace, we'll be broadcasting a fake transponder code. We don't want the *Harpy* to draw any unwanted attention in the Vaced system, so we'll show up on sensors as a merchant vessel from Coruscant."

"Sounds practical," Nuru said. "I just wish we could have found the hidden transmitter before we reached Vaced."

"Me too," Gunn said. "I hope I get my hands on whoever planted it!"

If whoever planted it doesn't get their hands on us first, Nuru thought. He watched Gunn and Chatterbox as they adjusted their instruments in preparation for the exit to real space. From what he could see, they appeared to have everything under control. *But that's what I thought before we wound up at the black hole.*

STAR WARS: Duel at Shattered Rock

A few minutes later, the cascade of hyperspace washed away from the cockpit's view and was suddenly replaced by a starfield. Gunn checked the scopes, then tapped the controls to angle the *Harpy* toward the nearest planet, which was orbited by a single small moon. She said, "Welcome to the Vaced system."

Nuru noticed a few small starships in the distance, moving to and from the planet Vaced. He said, "Gunn, can your scanners determine if any of those vessels belong to the Techno Union or other Separatist factions?"

Gunn examined another scope. "Readings indicate they're just merchant ships and private cruisers."

"How do you know they're not using fake transponder codes like we are?"

"Kid, if they start shooting at us, I'll shoot back, okay? Now just sit back and leave the flying to me. The sooner we land, the sooner we can find that transmitter, meet the commissioner from Kynachi, and be on our way to Coruscant." Looking at Chatterbox, she added, "Unless, of course, we find romance on Vaced, in which case we might stay awhile."

Chatterbox muttered, "My heart's all aflutter."

Gunn chuckled him in the shoulder. "You really don't know when to keep your mouth shut, do ya?!"

Nuru thought, *Gunn and Chatterbox certainly aren't behaving like sneaky saboteurs*. Once again, he found himself questioning Sharp's suspicions.

The *Harpy* was still traveling toward the green planet as another vessel dropped out of hyperspace into the Vaced system. The vessel was a MandalMotors *Pursuer*-class enforcement ship, and in its cockpit was the Mandalorian assassin Hudu Shiv.

Chapter Five

“Forget what I said about romance,” Lalo Gunn said as she led Chatterbox and Nuru Kungurama down the *Hasty Harpy*’s boarding ramp. “This place is a dump.”

Vaced Spaceport was a small sprawl of landing pads and a few ramshackle buildings, one of which appeared to be a trading post. Several workers and mechanics were visible. Nuru looked at the forested area beyond the spaceport. “I wouldn’t call it a dump, Captain Gunn. The planet is remarkably beautiful in its own way, and the spaceport has a quaint charm.”

Chatterbox, who was wearing a poncho to conceal his body armor, tapped Nuru’s shoulder. Nuru turned to see the clone glaring at him. “On second thought,” Nuru added hastily, “the forests are probably filled with vicious creatures, and I suspect the spaceport has limited amenities. I admit I know little of romance, but I doubt anyone would ever find it here.” He glanced at Chatterbox, who responded with an approving nod.

Gunn said, “Yeah? Well, you might change your tune about romance if you ever run into Veeren again.”

Veeran, also known as the Aristocra Sev’eere’nuruodo, an ambassador of the Chiss Ascendancy, was the first Chiss whom Nuru had ever met. Thinking of her, he felt his face flush a slightly deeper shade of blue.

STAR WARS: Duel at Shattered Rock

“You don’t have to listen to me, kid,” Gunn continued. “But the way I see things, if you meet someone you like, you might as well tell them so. Otherwise, you might regret that you didn’t say something when you had the chance.”

Nuru was deciding whether he should respond to Gunn’s comment when he was distracted by an unusual rumbling sound that came from beyond the spaceport’s perimeter. He said, “What’s that noise?”

“Swoops,” Gunn said. “Sounds like a bunch of ‘em.” She looked at Nuru and Chatterbox. “Don’t tell me you guys never heard of swoops before.”

Nuru cocked his head. Chatterbox shrugged.

Gunn sighed. “A swoop bike is basically a repulsorlift engine with a seat on it, usually for a single rider.”

Nuru said, “Like a speeder bike?”

“Bigger and faster. Way more powerful. Definitely not for kids.”

“I wasn’t thinking of riding one any time soon,” Nuru said. “We need to find the transmitter before Commissioner Sommilor arrives. I’ll be right back.”

Nuru went back up the *Harpy*’s boarding ramp. He found Breaker, Sharp, Knuckles, and Cleaver in the main hold. Like Chatterbox, the other clones were not wearing their helmets and had ponchos draped over their armor, and Cleaver had wriggled into a hooded robe. Nuru had instructed all the members of Breakout Squad to cover up because they did not want to attract any attention from the local population. To diminish the clones’ resemblance. Knuckles and Breaker wore different colored caps, and Sharp had a set of goggles strapped across his forehead.

Breaker said, “Is it all right for us to go outside, Commander?”

“Yes,” Nuru replied. “But we must exercise caution. Breaker, you and I will be lookouts while everyone else searches the hull for the transmitter.”

Ryder Windham

Sharp said, "Begging your pardon. Commander, but perhaps I should be a lookout? I have sharp eyesight. That's how I got my nickname, you know."

Nuru smiled politely as Sharp had mentioned the origin of his nickname more than once. "Thank you, Sharp, but finding the transmitter may require keen vision too."

"As you wish, Commander," Sharp replied.

Knuckles and Breaker walked out of the hold with Cleaver right behind them. Sharp stepped beside Nuru and whispered, "Commander, are you sure you wouldn't rather have me accompany you as a lookout? Until we identify the saboteur we shouldn't take any—"

"I'll be all right," Nuru said. "I'm trusting you to keep those sharp eyes of yours on everyone else."

"Very good, sir."

Sharp and Nuru stepped outside. They found the others standing on the landing pad beside the *Harpy*. Knuckles stretched. "Feels good to breathe fresh air for a change, doesn't it?"

"Sure does," Breaker said.

"I wouldn't know," Cleaver added. "I don't breathe."

Knuckles cast a glance at Sharp and said, "I think some of us prefer filtered air, at least while sleeping. Isn't that right, Sharp?" Knuckles laughed.

Sharp grinned and turned to Nuru. "Knuckles is just joking with me. I've gotten into the habit of sleeping with my helmet on. It helps muffle the noise of the *Harpy's* engines."

Knuckles said, "Every time I've ever fallen asleep while wearing my helmet, I wake up with a stiff neck."

"Cut the chatter," Gunn called out. "Let's find that rotten transmitter." She lowered an extendible maintenance ladder that stretched to the *Harpy's* upper hull. Chatterbox and Cleaver followed Gunn up the ladder while Sharp and Knuckles began searching for the transmitter on the lower hull.

STAR WARS: Duel at Shattered Rock

As Nuru and Breaker walked slowly around the ship, Breaker said, "Any idea what we might be looking out for, Commander?"

"Not really," Nuru said as they walked past a neighboring landing pad where an Arcona mechanic with an anvil-shaped head was working on his courier ship. "Anything resembling trouble, I guess."

Breaker glanced over his shoulder to make sure the other members of Breakout Squad would not be able to hear him. He whispered, "Permission to speak freely, Commander?"

"Yes, of course."

"It's about the activation of the *Harpy's* hyperspace transponder. The thing is, I'm certain I didn't do it, sir. And it's not exactly easy to switch it on accidentally."

He's sounding like Sharp, Nuru thought with some alarm. He whispered in return, "You're suggesting someone activated it deliberately?"

"I don't know, sir. But Sharp was helping me with the systems check, and ... Commander, have you noticed anything odd about Sharp?"

Nuru considered telling Breaker about Sharp's suspicions of a saboteur on the *Harpy*, but decided against it. He replied, "Why do you ask?"

"Lately, he seems ... well, guarded. And every few days, he reminds us all about his 'sharp eyesight.' Chatterbox and I were with him when Captain Lock nicknamed him Sharp. It's not as if we would forget."

"I did notice Sharp has mentioned his eyesight more than once, but I didn't think much of it."

"Just the same," Breaker added. "I'm concerned. When we get back to Coruscant, I'll recommend he consults a clone counselor, just to make sure everything is all right with—"

Rumbling noises came from beyond the wooded area next to the spaceport. Turning to face the tall trees, Breaker said, "Sounds like repulsorlift engines."

"Gunn told me they're swoop bikes."

Ryder Windham

And then five swoops tore into view, launching away from a cluster of trees at the edge of the woods. Even across the distance, Nuru could see that the biker on the rearmost swoop was an unusually large humanoid.

The five swoops angled toward the spaceport, and then the leader gunned his engine and veered off toward the *Harpy's* landing pad. The other bikers followed.

On top of the *Harpy*, Gunn saw the swoops and said, "Heads up, fellas." The other members of Breakout Squad paused in their search for the transmitter and directed their attention to the incoming bikers.

Stepping in front of Nuru, Breaker reached under his poncho to unholster his blaster pistol. Nuru said, "Stay calm, Breaker. They may be harmless."

The five bikers came to a stop and killed their engines at the edge of the landing pad. All the bikers had bolstered blasters at their belts. The lead biker wore a helmet with a large, sharp-tipped horn that extended above his visor. He pulled off the helmet to reveal it had a hole above the visor, and that the horn was actually part of his own hairless head. The biker had muddy-yellow skin and big black eyes. Nuru recognized the alien biker's species as an Advozse.

Three other bikers removed their helmets to reveal themselves as human males with unshaven faces. The monstrous biker on the rearmost swoop was the only one not wearing a helmet, but Nuru imagined few manufacturers made helmets for heads so large. The giant had orange skin and long, pointed ears that jutted out beside his head, and he wore a vest over his shirtless torso, exposing a mountainous mass of muscle. Dirty black hair sprouted from his cranium, and a large gold ring dangled below his nostrils. Nuru did not recognize the giant's species and suspected he was a hybrid, possibly a mix of human and Moggonite.

The giant swung his bulk off his swoop, which adjusted to the loss of weight by ascending several centimeters before it leveled

STAR WARS: Duel at Shattered Rock

off. Nuru guessed he was at least two meters tall. The giant faced Nuru and grinned, revealing a lot of sharp teeth.

The other bikers remained on their swoops. The Advozse blinked his black eyes at Breaker and said, "Welcome to Vaced, stranger. I'm Frutchoo. I represent the law around here, and these are my deputies."

The giant muttered, "You *know* I don't like being called your deputy, Frutchoo. Nobody bosses me around."

"Pardon me," Frutchoo said. "I meant to say my *associates*."

Breaker said, "Nice of you to greet us."

The giant yawned. "Can we get this over with? I wanna go get a drink."

"You *always* want to get a drink," said one of the human bikers. "You're a regular fozbeer fiend."

The giant reached out with one hand, grabbed the other biker by the collar, lifted him off the swoop, and snarled, "You got somethin' against fozbeer?"

The biker gasped, "No!"

"Good," said the giant. He released his grip. The biker landed hard upon his swoop's saddle.

Ignoring his allies, Frutchoo continued, "It's my duty to collect the spaceport tax from all new arrivals. The tax is kind of like insurance. It prevents anything bad from happening to your ship." He pointed to the nearby Arcona mechanic. "That guy probably wouldn't be fixing a thruster plate right now if he'd paid the tax."

Overhearing this, the Arcona sputtered with outrage, "I *did* pay the tax!"

"Not fast enough," Frutchoo said with a shrug.

Nuru smiled. "You don't want anyone to pay the spaceport tax."

Frutchoo shook his head and said, "I don't want anyone to pay the spaceport tax."

Nuru glanced at the giant and remembered what he had said about wanting a drink. Nuru said, "You're *all* very thirsty."

Ryder Windham

The other bikers cleared their throats while the giant dragged a massive, hairy arm across his suddenly parched lips. Frutchoo made a rasping sound, then said, "We're all very thirsty."

"You should find a nice, quiet place for a drink."

Frutchoo turned to the other bikers and said, "Let's go to the tavern for some drinks."

Nuru added, "You're buying."

"I'm buying." Frutchoo put his helmet back on, and then he and the giant climbed back onto their swoops. All the bikers gunned their engines, then Frutchoo led them back toward the trading post.

Breaker grinned. He had witnessed Nuru's skill with Jedi mind tricks before. As the swoop gang parked their swoops outside the trading post, which evidently had a tavern on the premises, Breaker said, "Well done, Commander."

A gust of wind blew in from over the grassy plain. As the breeze rustled through the leaves of the trees in the woods beside the spaceport, Breaker said, "I just had a nasty thought."

"What is it?"

"Those trees over there are the highest things in the area, the only things that overlook our position. A good vantage point for anyone who wanted to keep an eye on us. Maybe I should go take a look?"

"Good thinking," Nuru said. "But take your helmet and rifle." Patting the comlink that was clipped beside the two lightsabers on his belt, he added, "Contact me if you see anything unusual or need help."

"Yes, sir."

Breaker went back into the *Harpy* and exited a moment later, carrying his helmet and blaster rifle. Seeing him, Nuru said, "On second thought, contact me when you reach the trees."

"You're worried about me?"

"I'm concerned about us all."

STAR WARS: Duel at Shattered Rock

Breaker put on his helmet. "Talk with you soon, sir." He walked off, heading for the field of tall grass that lay between the spaceport and the forest.

Nuru looked at Knuckles and Sharp, who were both so busy searching for the transmitter on the *Harpy's* belly that they had not noticed Breaker's departure. Nuru considered telling Sharp to go along with Breaker, but when he looked back to the grassy field, Breaker had already vanished.

Hudu Shiv landed his enforcement ship in the shadow of a craggy cliff, six kilometers west of Vaced Spaceport. Looking through the cockpit window, he saw the surrounding rocks were weirdly cylindrical and colorful. He realized he had touched down in the remains of an ancient petrified forest. Except for a small cloud of insects several meters away from the ship, there was no sign of life.

Shiv had already attached the leather utility belt that Dooku had given him to his own belt. Leaving the cockpit, he secured his rifle across his shoulder as he moved past the hatch for the ship's emergency lifeboat. He went to the cargo hold, where a sleek speeder bike was racked against a bulkhead. The bike appeared to be a standard Mobquet Ripper with a powerful repulsorlift engine and front-mounted steering vanes, but the engine was armor-plated and the steering vanes had been filed to razor sharpness. The bike also carried a small arsenal of concealed weapons as well as a supply pack that held a set of tree-climbing spurs.

Moving methodically, Shiv unlocked the bike, pulled it away from the bulkhead, and used his elbow to press a button to open the cargo hatch as he climbed onto the bike. The hatch opened with a hissing sound. He kicked off with his legs, allowing the bike to glide silently out of the ship. Once outside, he tapped a remote to secure the ship and then launched his bike away from his landing site.

Ryder Windham

The surrounding rocks suddenly blurred past Shiv's bike. Less than a minute later, he was skimming over the grassy plain, heading for the forest near the spaceport. Behind his helmet, his steely eyes glanced at a time display. If Count Dooku's intelligence sources were correct, Commissioner Sommilor's ship would arrive on Vaced in less than an hour.

Shiv accelerated. He ignored the rush of air against his armored shoulders and blocked out the whine of the speeder bike's engine. Calming his mind, he visualized what would happen next.

He would reach the forest. He would park the speeder bike near the base of a tall tree. He would climb the tree, taking his rifle with him. He would watch the skies for Sommilor's starship and wait for it to land at the spaceport.

And then the killing would begin.

Chapter Six

Boom.

Ring-Sol Ambase opened his eyes. *Was that thunder?*

Still lying on the bed chat was surrounded by medical computers, Ambase looked to the single window in his chamber, trying to determine whether the gray sky had grown darker.

How long was I unconscious? He remembered the droids had escorted the clone trooper out of his chamber. He did not recall drifting off into a dreamless sleep, or—

Boom. KaBOOM.

Ambase's body went rigid. *That's not thunder.*

More explosions followed, each growing louder than the last. Ambase thought they sounded like cluster bombs. As another series of explosions shook the walls and knocked the medical equipment to the floor, he took a deep breath and tried to elevate his head and shoulders. One of the diagnostic computers began beeping loudly.

As more blasts wracked the building, three B1 battle droids, each carrying an E-5 blaster rifle, stumbled through the doorway into Ambase's chamber. The droids began hastily gathering the medical equipment. The third droid grabbed metal bar at the foot of Ambase's bed and yanked it hauling the bed toward the doorway. As the bed moved across the room without any

Ryder Windham

indication of friction against the floor, Ambase realized his bed rested upon a hovering gravsled.

“What’s happening?” Ambase said. “Who’s attacking the—“

From the bed, Ambase watched in amazement as the clone who claimed to be Sharp—still clad in the gray clothes Dooku had given him—dived head first through the doorway and into the chamber. One droid opened fire, missing the clone but blasting a hole near the base of one wall. The clone somersaulted and came to a stop in a low crouch. He was holding a blaster rifle. He fired, cutting down two droids instantly.

The remaining droid returned fire. The clone jumped sideways to dodge the blaster bolts, then kicked off one wall and launched himself at the droid.

The clone slammed against the droid’s body, causing the droid to stumble backward. Unprepared for the assault, the droid fired reflexively and accidentally blasted the transparisteel window behind him. The window exploded outward, and a cold wind whipped into the chamber. The droid tripped over his feet and fell back against the ruined window’s frame.

Moving fast, the clone braced one of his own legs behind the droid’s left ankle as he shoved the droid hard. The shove carried the droid through the window, and then the droid was gone.

Ambase gasped. “How did you—?”

“No time to talk, sir.” The clone stepped over the ruined droids, seized the metal bar at the foot of the bed, and pulled the gravsled after him through the doorway.

More explosions sounded outside the building as the clone hauled the gravsled through a corridor. Ambase saw dust falling from the ceiling and squeezed his eyes shut. He said, “Where’s Dooku?”

“I think he went to his sailer.” More blasts wracked the building, Ambase opened his eyes to see the clone was heading for a closed door. The clone used his elbow to strike a metal panel on the wall, and the door slid open.

STAR WARS: Duel at Shattered Rock

The clone hauled him through the doorway. Ambase smelled cold, wet air mixed with fire and smoke. Ambase's eyes began to tear. He held his breath and closed his eyes again. He felt rain pelt his face and heard the roar of starfighters overhead. Recognizing the noise of the engines, he gasped out, "Republic starfighters?"

"Sounds like it, sir."

When they emerged from the smoke, Ambase opened his eyes and saw that the clone had delivered them to a staggered series of landing pads. Ambase realized the pads were the ones that the clone had mentioned earlier while looking out the window from the medical chamber. The clone had claimed he had seen three ships, but Ambase saw only two. One was a needle-nosed, ridged-back Kuat *Corona*-class transport, which showed no obvious sign of damage. The other was a blazing wreck, but Ambase could make out that it was a seed-shaped vessel with two long, forward prongs jutting above and below a bubble cockpit, which was now shattered and expelling gas and smoke. Ambase immediately recognized the wreckage.

Dooku's solar sailer! Is Dooku ... dead?!

The Kuat transport's hatch was already open. The clone shoved the gravsled that carried Ambase through the Kuat transport's open hatch, and then secured the gravsled to a bulkhead behind the cockpit. Blaster fire began hammering at the transport's exterior. The clone jumped into the cockpit and began throwing switches.

Ambase said, "You can fly this?"

"Yes, sir."

Ambase heard the engines fire, and then the transport lifted off. Rain pounded at the hull, and the entire ship shuddered as it rose up through gray clouds. Twisting his head, Ambase could see the clone in the cockpit, wrestling with the flight controls.

Laser fire tore at the transport's shields. Ambase said, "Who's shooting at us?"

Ryder Windham

"The scopes read twelve Delta-7Bs. I can't see them through these clouds."

Startled, Ambase said, "Twelve ... Jedi starfighters?!"

"They think we're the enemy! I'm trying to hail them." Another explosion caused the transport to lurch hard to port. "The comm's not working. I can't—"

"Just get us out of here!"

The clone took evasive action, sending the transport hard to the side, then arcing straight up. They broke through the clouds, and a field of stars came into view. As they hurtled into space, Ambase said, "Are we being followed?"

"No, sir. Scopes indicate the starfighters stayed behind to hammer Dooku's castle." The clone adjusted one of the scopes.

"Tell me ... how did you get out of your cell?"

"I overheard Dooku telling the droids that Republic ships were incoming. He told the droids to bring you and me to his solar sailer. Two droids were escorting me from my cell when I decided to make a break for it. I got lucky."

Ambase's mind raced. "Do you know if Dooku survived?"

"No, sir. But if he made it into his sailer before it got hit, I doubt he could have lived."

Even though Ambase was still weak, he suspected he would have sensed Dooku's death. He took a deep breath. "Can you confirm we're in the Bogden system?"

The clone checked a navigational console. "Readings indicate we just left Kohlma, one of Bogden's moons. Our hyperdrive appears to be operational. Should I set the navi-computer to plot a course for Coruscant?"

Ambase suddenly recalled what Dooku had said about the possibility of the Sith turning Jedi apprentices against their own Masters. "No. I need time to recover ... and think." He remembered Dooku's claim that Nuru had seized Bilbringi Depot. Although he had no reason to believe Dooku, he felt compelled to investigate. He said, "Can you get us to the Bilbringi system?"

STAR WARS: Duel at Shattered Rock

The clone consulted the nav console again. "Yes, sir, but... it will take a while."

"Do it."

Count Dooku stood outside his castle and watched the astromech droids extinguish the flames from the apparently ruined solar sailer. In fact, the wreckage had been originally nothing more than a full-scale, nonworking replica. His actual ship had been moved to a hangar on the other side of the castle.

Thanks to the falling rain, the fire-fighting astromechs accomplished their job quickly. When they were done, Dooku directed their attention to the castle's entrance and said, "There are wrecked droids inside the castle. Gather all of their parts and bring them to the recycler." One astromech beeped in response, then the others followed him away from the smoldering replica.

The sound of Jedi starfighters circling overhead did not alarm Dooku, for the noise, like the replica solar sailer was a ruse of his invention. He looked up to see Asajj Ventress's Fanblade starfighter descend to the landing pad that had been previously occupied by the Kuat transport. Hovering alongside Ventress's fighter were eleven small, silver orbs.

Ventress exited her fighter and spotted Dooku standing below his personal floating energy shield. "The transport fled into space," she said. "If the smoke bombs and flash detonators weren't enough to convince those two fools that Republic forces were attacking your castle, seeing twelve 'Jedi starfighters' on their scopes certainly did the job."

Dooku glanced at the floating orbs. Like Ventress's Fanblade, each orb had been rigged to transmit a signal that would make them appear as Delta-7Bs on enemy scopes. Dooku said, "Remove the fake transponder codes from your fighter and the remotes, then meet me inside the communications chamber."

Dooku started to walk away, but Ventress said, "Wait. I don't like being kept in the dark. Tell me, Master ... why did you have

Ryder Windham

me bring Ambase and that clone all the way from Kynachi, only to let them escape?”

Dooku smiled. “If you ever had any reservations about working in darkness, Ventress, you never should have offered your services to me.” And then Dooku turned and walked back to his castle, leaving Ventress quietly fuming in the rain.

Chapter Seven

“I’ve found something,” Cleaver said. Standing with Lalo Gunn and Chatterbox atop the *Hasty Harpy*, the droid held out a small, weathered strip of metal with a clamping mechanism on one end. “It was stuck along the upper edge of a heat vent. Could it be the transmitter?”

Gunn said, “*That* is a durasteel patch, and the only thing it’s transmitting is your lack of brain waves. Put it back where you found it and keep looking.”

“Yes, Captain.”

On the landing pad, in the *Harpy*’s shadow, Nuru Kungurama walked quietly back and forth.

He was alternately watching the perimeter of Vaced Spaceport and the sky overhead. He glanced at Knuckles and Sharp, who were still busy searching every nook of the *Harpy*’s belly for the mysterious transmitter.

Sharp moved away from one of the *Harpy*’s landing legs. Looking past Nuru, he said, “Where’s Breaker?”

“He went to look around over there,” Nuru said, gesturing to the tall trees at the edge of the wooded area beside the spaceport.

Sharp stepped closer to Nuru. Lowering his voice so Knuckles could not hear, he said, “Commander, I’m not sure

Ryder Windham

that was a good idea. So long as Breaker is a suspect, he shouldn't be allowed to—"

"I trust him, Sharp," Nuru interrupted. Keeping his own voice low, he continued, "I realize there may be a saboteur among us, but I trust Breaker just as much as I trust you." He looked again to the forest. "If anyone *is* watching us, we wouldn't want to find out the hard way."

"No, sir," Sharp said. "That we wouldn't."

Breaker moved quietly and kept low, making sure his helmet never poked above the high grass that grew at the edge of the forest. He could still hear the noises of workers and a few vehicles from the spaceport, which was now nearly half a kilometer behind him. Moving up a low slope, he held his rifle ready and kept his eyes on the trees ahead.

Snap.

Breaker stopped and swung his rifle to his right to see what had made the sound. He saw a group of medium-sized reptavians with shimmering green-and-blue scales around their long, unfeathered necks. One reptavian had just broken a twig that it was adding to its nest. The reptavians glanced at Breaker, then looked away, apparently disinterested.

Breaker pressed on, moving through the grass until he arrived at a cluster of tall trees. Listening carefully, he realized the noises from the spaceport had become less distinct. He stepped cautiously around the wide trunk of one tree and let his helmet's optical sensors adjust to the shadowy forest floor.

Something moved to his upper left, and Breaker instinctively took aim with his rifle. He found himself staring at a pair of reptiles that were slithering around the lower limbs of the nearest tree. The lizards' dark leathery skin blended almost perfectly with the tree's bark. Breaker lowered his rifle but kept his finger close to the trigger.

He moved between the trees to a rise that offered a clear view of the spaceport. He was able to easily pick out the *Hasty Harpy*

STAR WARS: Duel at Shattered Rock

from the other ships across the distance, and he could also see a few small specks that he knew were actually people near the trading post. Activating his helmet's built-in comlink, he said, "Breaker to Kungurama, do you read me?"

A moment later, Nuru's voice responded, "I read you. Breaker. Find anything interesting?"

"Just flora and fauna. But I'm still looking."

"Keep me posted."

Breaker turned off his comlink and looked around his position. Knowing his view of the spaceport would be better from a higher elevation, he tilted his head back and looked up to study the thickness and location of the branches that weaved between the trees. He was still plotting his climb to one particular branch when he noticed what appeared to be a gouge in the bark of one tree, just below a freshly broken branch.

The gouge looked as if it had been made by the heel of a boot.

Breaker backed up, carefully and silently. Keeping his rifle leveled at the tree in front of him, he looked up and down, searching for any sign of the person, creature, or droid that must have stepped on the branch and broken it.

As he moved backward, he was surprised to bump into something behind him. He spun around to see he had struck a speeder bike that was parked at a dead hover above the ground.

And then something hit Breaker hard against the back of his helmet and everything went dark.

Hudu Shiv hung upside down, his jetpack's missile aimed at the ground. He peered through his helmet's visor and watched the clone trooper fall. Still mostly concealed by a Mandalorian camouflage net, he had his legs wrapped around a strong branch that extended directly above the trooper. His boots were outfitted with the tree-climbing spurs he had brought from his ship.

Ryder Windham

Two minutes earlier, Shiv had been halfway up the tree when he had spotted the top of the trooper's helmet moving through the high grass near a bunch of reptavians at the edge of the forest. Shiv had then descended to his current position, concealed himself with the camo net, dangled from the branch, and waited for the trooper to move beneath him. When that moment came, he had used his rifle's butt to bring the trooper down with a single blow.

Clutching his rifle, Shiv swung down from the branch and landed between the parked speeder bike and the unconscious trooper's crumpled body. He brushed back the camo net so it was draped over one shoulder, slung his rifle over his back, then bent down and pulled off the trooper's helmet.

Although members of the Death Watch had become aware of the origins of the Republic's clone army, Shiv found himself impressed by the unmasked clone's remarkable resemblance to Jango Fett. Shiv had known Fett, and from what he could see, the only physical difference was that Fett's face had been heavily scarred.

Shiv placed the trooper's helmet on the ground. He could see the clone was still breathing.

Dooku's instructions had been very specific: Shiv was to refrain from killing anyone until after the ship from Kynachi arrived on Vaced, and he was to leave Vaced without being seen. And so he reached to his belt, uncoiled a long, thin strand of plastifiber, and quickly bound the trooper's wrists and ankles. Tearing off a length of the camo net, he wrapped it tightly across the clone's mouth, gagging him, and then continued wrapping it around the clone's eyes. He shoved the clone up against a tree and used another strand of plastifiber to tie him to the trunk.

He picked up the trooper's helmet, looked inside it, and saw the embedded comlink. Not wanting to waste precious time prying out the comlink, he tucked the entire helmet into his camo net, then moved past his speeder bike and went to the tree that he had already selected as his firing point. As sturdy as it was tall,

STAR WARS: Duel at Shattered Rock

the tree's upper branches swayed only slightly, not enough to pose any problems for a sniper of Shiv's caliber. Although his jetpack could have carried him swiftly to the top of the tree, the jets would have been visible from the spaceport. He dug his spurs into the tree's bark and scurried upward.

Arriving at his perch, Shiv strapped himself to a thick bough. He removed the trooper's helmet from the camo net and jammed it over some twigs that jutted out from a branch near his own head.

Shiv looked down at the grassy field that stretched out below the trees. He spotted the reptavians, still at rest. He hoped they would remain where they were for a while yet.

He unslung his rifle and popped its retractable targeting scope. The electronic scope transmitted visual data directly to an optical sensor inside his T-visor, enabling him to clearly see the scope's focal point without removing his helmet. He braced the stock up against his right shoulder and let the rifle's barrel rest upon another branch to steady his aim. Shiv shifted the rifle slowly, letting it pivot on the branch as he searched for the ship that had delivered the clone trooper to Vaced.

Sweeping the scope from ship to ship, Shiv passed over an Arcona who appeared to be mending a thruster plate on an old courier, and then spied a man who wore a poncho and was kneeling atop a Corellian YT-1760 transport. The man turned his head. Shiv saw his face was identical to the captive clone's.

Two more figures became visible atop the Corellian transport. Much to Hudus Shiv's surprise, one was a Separatist BX-series droid commando. The other was a human female.

Behind his helmet's visor, Shiv scowled. Count Dooku had not mentioned anything about a droid commando. Shiv wondered if Dooku had known about the droid, or if there were anything else that the Separatist leader had failed to tell him.

Shifting the scope, Shiv saw two more clone troopers moving beneath the transport. And then he saw a third figure, standing on the ground near the boarding ramp: a young blue-skinned boy

Ryder Windham

he recognized immediately from the hologram that Dooku had shown him. The boy was Nuru Kungurama, the Jedi.

Shiv took a deep breath and then exhaled slowly. His education had included history lessons about Mandalorian encounters with the Jedi, and he knew it was best if he remained calm. Jedi were notorious for their ability to detect powerful emotions. Some scholars maintained a Jedi could sense an enemy's anxiety and rage as easily as a microbarometer could measure atmospheric pressure.

Increasing the Targeting scope's magnification, Shiv zoomed in on Kungurama's head. The boy turned and looked toward the forest, his red eyes drifting until he seemed to be looking directly at Shiv. The sniper did not panic, and his index finger, already curled around his rifle's trigger, did not twitch. The boy's gaze drifted again, and then he tilted his head back to gaze skyward.

Keeping Kungurama's head at the very center of the scope's crosshairs, Shiv licked his upper lip. He would not deny he was tempted to squeeze the trigger but he was obliged to obey Dooku's instructions. It was a matter of honor.

A sound caught Shiv's attention. Without moving his rifle, he lifted his gaze to the sky to follow Kungurama's gaze at an incoming ship—a Suwantek Systems TL-1800 freighter. Evidently, the commissioner from Kynachi was arriving right on schedule.

Shiv did not take any pleasure from killing. As a Death Watch assassin, taking lives was simply what he did, and what he did best. Still, as the TL-1800 flew toward the spaceport, he did find himself pleased with the progress of his current assignment.

He liked it when his targets were punctual.

“Heads up, fellas,” Lalo Gunn said from atop the *Hasty Harpy*, where she stood near Chatterbox and Cleaver. Chatterbox looked up to see the TL-1800 freighter descending to Vaced Spaceport.

STAR WARS: Duel at Shattered Rock

Cleaver rose from a section of hull behind the *Harpy's* cockpit. Holding up a small gray cylinder with a magnetic strip on the side and a single black metal rod sticking out of one end, he said, "I've found something."

"Save it for later, Cleaver," Gunn said as she moved to the edge of the ship.

"But I think—"

"Not now!" While Cleaver continued to study the gray cylinder, Gunn leaned out over the side of the ship and called out, "Hey, kid! The commissioner's ship is coming in!"

Nuru stood on the landing pad near the *Harpy's* boarding ramp. He had already heard and spotted the ship, which now hovered over a vacant landing pad just beyond the Arcona's courier ship. Knuckles and Sharp stepped out from under the *Harpy* and moved up beside Nuru.

"I should alert Breaker," Nuru said. He activated his comlink. "Nuru to Breaker, do you read me?"

Through his rifle scope, the Mandalorian saw Kungurama speaking into the comlink at the same time that he heard the boy's voice emit from the helmet he had taken from the knocked-out trooper. Keeping his right hand gripped on the rifle and his eye on the scope, Shiv reached into the trooper's helmet and dragged his gloved fingers back and forth across the embedded comlink. He spoke in short, fragmented bursts. "Barely hear ... is fine but interference in ... maybe trees." Then he stopped talking but continued scratching the comlink, waiting for the boy's response.

"What's wrong with Breaker's voice?" Knuckles said.

"Too much static," Sharp said. "Sounded like he said maybe the trees are causing interference."

"Quiet," Nuru said as he adjusted the comlink. "Breaker, if you can hear me, return to the spaceport. The ship from Kynachi has arrived." He returned the comlink to his belt.

Ryder Windham

Nuru took a few steps away from the *Harpy*, then turned and looked up to see Gunn, Chatterbox, and Cleaver on the upper hull. “I sent Breaker to scout the woods, but something’s interfering with our comlinks. You three stay here and watch the perimeter, see if you can spot him while the rest of us greet the commissioner.”

Gunn said, “Say *please*.”

“Please, Captain Gunn.”

“Okay.”

Nuru led Sharp and Knuckles around the Arcona’s pad, but stopped short of the next one, where the TL-1800’s landing jets were kicking up a circle of dust. The ship’s articulated legs were still settling onto the ground as a hatch opened on the port side and then a boarding ramp extended.

Shiv could not have anticipated which landing pad the TL-1800 would touch down upon, or which way its boarding hatches would be facing. From what he could see, Kungurama and two clones faced the ship’s extended boarding ramp. He could not see the hatch that he knew must be at the top of the ramp, but a moment later, he saw two men step down toward Kungurama.

Two broad-shouldered pilots in green uniforms exited the TL-1800’s hatch and descended the ramp. Nuru noticed KynachTech insignias on their tunics. The ship’s engines were still winding down as Langu Sommilor stepped out after the pilots. Sommilor smiled. Raising his voice so he could be heard over the engines, he said, “Nuru Kungurama, I presume?”

Shiv watched the two men lead Sommilor down the ramp. He expected Kungurama would bow his head in greeting to Sommilor and was not surprised when the Jedi did just that. Kungurama had just lowered his head as Shiv thumbed his rifle’s ammo-select button and quickly shifted the weapon down and to the side. The resting reptavians appeared in his scope. He squeezed the trigger.

STAR WARS: Duel at Shattered Rock

His selected projectile was an explosive compressed-air pellet. It smashed into the ground between the reptavians and detonated with a quiet pop that sent a blast of air in all directions,

As the alarmed but unharmed creatures screeched and took flight, Shiv had already thumbed the ammo-select button again and swung his rifle back toward Sommilor's ship, just in time to view Kungurama, through the scope, lift his head to face Sommilor.

Facing Sommilor, Nuru was momentarily distracted by a flock of reptavians that rose from the field before the forest. He wondered if Breaker had stumbled upon the creatures' nesting grounds.

Shiv locked his target in the scope's crosshairs. He exhaled. He squeezed the trigger. This time, his selected projectiles were not compressed-air pellets.

Chapter Eight

Standing before Nuru at the bottom of the TL-1800's boarding ramp, Commissioner Sommilor winced as he reached up and slapped the back of his own neck. For a moment, Nuru thought the man had been stung by an insect, but then Sommilor gasped and fell to his knees.

Nuru took a quick step forward to catch Sommilor, wrapping his arms around the man's torso to hold him upright. Sharp, Knuckles, and the two KynachTech pilots leaned in as Sommilor's head lolled onto Nuru's shoulder. Sharp said, "Did he faint?"

Nuru moved his hand up behind Sommilor's neck and felt a tiny object sticking out. He plucked the object out and held it up for inspection. It was a dart, its sharp tip smeared with blood.

"Sniper," Sharp said as he swung his blaster rifle out from under his poncho and jumped beside Nuru and Sommilor, positioning his own body as a shield to protect the others.

Knuckles was already brandishing his rifle. Looking at the two KynachTech pilots, he said, "Take cover!" Before either pilot could obey the command, one slapped at the side of his own neck, and then the other did the same. Both men gasped and collapsed.

STAR WARS: Duel at Shattered Rock

“Help them!” Nuru said urgently as he shuffled backward, hauling Sommilor with him. He wanted to draw his lightsaber, but he needed both hands to drag Sommilor to safety. While Knuckles and Sharp grabbed the two fallen pilots, Nuru reprimanded himself for having been temporarily distracted by the reptavians that had taken flight a moment before Sommilor had been hit. He did not pause to check Sommilor’s pulse as he shoved the man’s body under the boarding ramp.

Staying close to the side of the ship, Nuru drew his lightsaber, ignited its blue blade, and prepared to strike any more incoming darts. Because the Arcona’s courier ship blocked his view of the *Hasty Harpy*, he did not know whether Chatterbox, Gann, and Cleaver were aware of the attack. With his free hand, he activated his comlink and said, “Chatterbox! Get everyone off the top of the *Harpy*. A sniper hit the Kynachi landing party.”

Nuru looked away from the ship, visually calculating the darts’ firing point to the high trees at the edge of the forest. And then he remembered ...

Breaker?! Nuru felt suddenly queasy.

Sharp moved close to Nuru and said, “Keep your head down. Commander!”

Has Breaker been killed? Or did he fire the darts? Nuru felt overwhelmed and unsure of what to do next. He took a breath and relaxed his mind.

“Commander, please step back to the—”

Nuru deactivated his lightsaber. “Secure the perimeter and don’t let anyone else get hurt,” he said quickly. “I’m going after the sniper,”

Sharp started to protest, but Nuru was already sprinting away from the TL-1800, heading for the trading post. Although his Jedi powers enabled him to run faster than ordinary humanoids, Nuru knew that he might not reach the forest in time to stop the sniper from escaping, especially if the sniper had a transport. He ran a zigzag path past the landing pads until he arrived at the swoops parked outside the trading post.

Ryder Windham

Nuru did not waste any time selecting a vehicle. He jumped onto the saddle of the nearest swoop. In less than a second, he assessed that the controls were not very different from the speeder bikes used for training exercises at the Jedi Temple. Unfortunately, the swoop's customized handlebar controllers were beyond his grasp. He realized he had landed on the swoop that belonged to the orange-skinned giant.

"Hey!" someone roared behind Nuru. He glanced over his shoulder to see the giant himself, stepping away from a tree outside the trading post. "Get offa my bike!"

Nuru leaped onto a smaller swoop and seized the controllers without difficulty. "I'm just borrowing this," he said before he punched the ignition.

He gunned the engine, then zoomed away from the trading post. Unprepared for the swoop's incredible velocity, he tightened his grip on the handlebars and had to press his thighs against the saddle to keep his legs from flying out from under him. Within seconds, he was racing over the grassy field that lay between the spaceport and the forest.

Just as he had sprinted across the spaceport, Nuru cut a zigzag path over the field. He believed weaving from side to side was the best way to avoid making himself an easy target.

But then he swerved too hard. The swoop went into an unexpected half roll that carried him upside down. Blades of grass whipped at his inverted head as he hurtled forward. He adjusted his grip on one of the handlebars, and the swoop completed its roll so he was once again upright. No sooner had he regained control of the swoop when he sensed movement behind him. He risked a quick look back. Four swoops were tearing away from the spaceport, racing after him. Frutchoo and the giant were in the lead, followed by the human bikers, two of whom were seated on a single swoop. Nuru realized the giant must have alerted the other members of the gang, who were swerving wildly. He suspected they were so angry they couldn't steer straight.

STAR WARS: Duel at Shattered Rock

He doubted Frutchoo's gang had any interest in his reasons for taking one of their swoops.

Hudu Shiv brought the Republic trooper's helmet with him as he climbed down the tree. During his descent, he saw Nuru Kungurama run to the trading post and take a swoop, and now, as he walked toward his own speeder bike, he could hear the swoop's engine getting increasingly louder as it approached the forest. He glanced at the tree trunk where he had left the clone, who remained bound and motionless.

Reaching to his own belt, Shiv unclasped the leather utility belt that Dooku had given him. He tossed the belt down so it fell beside the clone's body, where it would be easily found.

Shiv heard more swoops roaring across the distance. He trotted past his speeder bike and moved around a tree to see Kungurama steering a swoop low over the grassy field with four swoops coming up fast behind him.

Shiv considered Count Dooku's orders. He was not about to let the swoop gang interfere with the mission. He reached to the back of his belt and unclipped a thermal detonator. He set the detonator on a ten-second delay, placed it in the clone trooper's helmet, and then threw the helmet past the trees so it arced over the field and into the path of the approaching swoops.

Looking away from the swoops on his tail, Nuru turned his head just in time to see a white helmet ramble through the air in front of him.

Breaker?

He pushed hard at the swoop's maneuvering controls to avoid a collision with the helmet. As the helmet sailed past him, he saw a glint of metal inside it, and his instincts screamed *Grenade!*

The helmet bounced off the ground and was still rolling as Nuru pumped the brakes and spun the swoop through a tight turn that left him facing the incoming bikers. Letting go of the controls, he raised his hands and shouted, "Stop!"

Ryder Windham

The swoop gang didn't break or turn, but Nuru saw the giant's eyes go wide with surprise. And then the grenade detonated.

The shock wave tossed Nuru's swoop back through the air and nearly threw him from his saddle. The ground where the helmet had landed was now a gaping crater filled with a raging fireball that rapidly mushroomed into a tower of smoke. The shredded, blazing remains of swoops and bikers flew in all directions from the blast radius.

A wave of heat hit Nuru at the same time as the mangled remains of one human biker landed below his swoop. A split second later, the giant biker's body collapsed with a loud thud upon a slope that led up to a cluster of trees. Nuru had to fight back a feeling of nausea. He felt awful that his attempt to warn the bikers about the grenade had failed. Although the bikers had been hostile, he had never considered them enemies, and had never meant to lead them to their deaths.

But then, he had not been the one who had thrown the grenade. Looking beyond the body of the giant biker to the cluster of trees, he saw a shadowy figure climbing onto a speeder bike. Nuru gripped his swoop's controls, swung the swoop toward the trees, and rocketed forward.

As Nuru neared the trees, the mysterious biker sped off into the forest. Nuru was about to give chase when he saw, out of the corner of his eye, a thrashing movement at the base of one tree. Turning his head, he found Breaker bound to the tree's trunk. Breaker was blindfolded and gagged, struggling to release himself. Although Nuru was immediately concerned and disturbed by the sight of Breaker so helpless, he was also relieved, for now he was certain that Breaker was not the man who had shot Sommilor and the others. He also felt guilty. *How could I have suspected Breaker?*

Nuru brought the swoop to a hovering stop near the fallen giant's body. He jumped off the swoop and ran to Breaker's side. "Breaker! Hold still!" He tugged off the blindfold and gag, then

STAR WARS: Duel at Shattered Rock

ignited his lightsaber and cut through the plastifiber bonds. In his haste, he failed to notice the leather utility belt that rested on the ground to his left.

“What hit me?” Breaker muttered, dazed. “Heard a loud bang and—” Breaker’s eyes closed, and then his body went slack as he slid back into unconsciousness.”

Nuru saw Breaker was still breathing. He switched on his comlink.

“Commander!” Sharp’s voice came from the comm. “Are you all right? We saw the explosion from the spaceport and—!”

“I’m fine,” Nurū interrupted, “but Breaker’s down. Come get him.” Leaving Breaker, he continued speaking as he ran back to the swoop. “The sniper fled into the woods. I can’t let him escape.”

“Sir, you should wait for us to—”

Nuru switched off the comlink and jumped back onto the swoop. He did not want to leave Breaker behind, but he could not risk losing the sniper. But just as he gripped the swoop’s controls, the swoop jerked suddenly backward in the air, as if it had been snared by a powerful tractor beam.

Nuru glanced back and was stunned to see the orange-skinned giant standing upright, his arms wrapped around the back of the swoop. The giant’s vest was smoldering, and a freshly blistered wound stretched across his left bicep. Nurū was about to reach for his lightsaber when the giant said, “That guy I saw taking off on a speeder bike. He a friend of yours?”

Still startled, Nurū shook his head. “He’s a sniper,” he said urgently, “he just shot some people. I took the swoop to go after him.”

“I got a bone to pick with him, too, so shove over!” The giant swung himself onto the swoop so he was seated behind Nurū, and the swoop shuddered under his weight. Before Nurū could protest, the giant reached past the boy’s arms and seized the controls. The swoop’s engine roared, and they launched into the woods.

Ryder Windham

Pressed back against the giant's chest, Nuru watched the trees whip past the swoop at a sickening speed. Raising his voice so he could be heard over the engine, he said, "I'm sorry about your friends."

"Those losers weren't my friends,TM the giant said as he tore through a small clearing. "I was just passing time."

"But ... if they weren't your friends, why do you want to get the sniper?"

"He wasted my swoop!"

Nuru did not have to look at the speedometer to know they were traveling faster than he ever would have dared on his own through the densely wooded area. Although the giant steered the swoop with amazing agility, Nuru realized he was somewhat at the enormous biker's mercy.

Sharp had used his comlink to alert the other members of Breakout Squad that Nuru had gone after the sniper. Gunn and Chatterbox were already seated in the *Hasty Harpy's* cockpit and had the engines up and running. Cleaver stood at the bottom of the *Harpy's* boarding ramp at the spaceport, waiting for Sharp and Knuckles.

Against Cleaver's left thigh clung the magnetic gray-metal cylinder that he had found earlier on the ship's hull. The droid had hung on to the cylinder for the simple reason that Gunn had told him to save it for later, and his leg seemed like a practical place to keep it.

Cleaver saw Sharp and Knuckles running toward the *Harpy*. He said, "The Kynachi ship is secured?"

"Yes," Sharp answered as he hurried up the ramp with Knuckles and Cleaver right behind him. Leaving Knuckles and Cleaver in the main hold, Sharp grabbed his helmet and pulled it over his head before he ran to the cockpit.

The *Harpy* lifted off the ground, rotated horizontally, then launched toward the column of smoke and fire that rose near the edge of the woods. Sharp arrived, in the cockpit and saw

STAR WARS: Duel at Shattered Rock

Chatterbox was already wearing his own helmet. Gunn kept her eyes on the small inferno in front of her as she said, "Did the kid tell you how bad Breaker was hurt?"

"No," Sharp said. "Just that he was down."

Gunn guided the *Harpy* around the smoke and brought the ship close to the edge of the woods. Chatterbox leaned forward in his seat, pointed to the bottom of a tree, and said, "There's Breaker."

Gunn scowled. "Are you gonna talk all day or are you gonna go get him?" But Chatterbox was already following Sharp out of the cockpit.

Gunn adjusted the controls, and the *Harpy* came to a hover. Knuckles, Chatterbox, Sharp, and Cleaver were all carrying weapons as they spilled out of the ship. They ran to Breaker and found him still unconscious. They also found the leather utility belt that the sniper had left behind.

Cleaver snatched up the belt. The droid and Chatterbox watched for any sign of danger while Sharp and Knuckles lifted Breaker. When they were all back inside the *Harpy's* main hold, Knuckles hit the ship's intercom and said, "All on board, Gunn. Let's find the commander."

Nuru struggled to remain calm as the giant sent the swoop through the gap in a split-boughed tree. Raising his voice so he could be heard over the swoop's engine, Nuru shouted, "Did you see which way the speeder went?"

"No."

"Then how do you know we're going the right way?"

"Don't need to see him." The giant's nostrils flared above the gold ring that dangled from his nose. "I can smell his bike's exhaust trail."

Nuru saw shafts of light up ahead and realized they were nearing the outer edge of the forest. The giant bellowed, "What's your name, kid?"

"Nuru. What's yours?"

Ryder Windham

“Gizman. But call me Gizz. Everybody does.”

With a loud rush of wind and swirling leaves, the swoop burst out of the forest like a cumbersome missile. A wide, grassy plain yawned out before them, and beyond that, a rocky plateau.

Because Nuru had lost precious time while releasing Breaker from his bonds and making Gizz’s acquaintance, he feared he had little chance of catching up with the sniper. But as the swoop tore over the grass, he sighted a distant object moving toward the plateau. It was the speeder hike. “There he is!”

“I’m on him.”

Nuru locked his eyes on the speeder bike while Gizz accelerated, closing the distance between them and their quarry. They were still too far away for Nuru to have a clear view of the biker himself. Several seconds later, Gizz said, “Well, I’ll be blasted.”

“What’s wrong?”

“He’s heading for Shattered Rock.”

“What’s that?”

“Not what, where. Shattered Rock’s a canyon.”

“Is it hazardous?”

Gizz grinned. “That’s one way of putting it.” He twisted the throttle, and the swoop rocketed after the fleeing bike.

Chapter Nine

Hudu Shiv knew the Jedi might try to pursue him. But as he rode his speeder back to the canyon where he had left his starship, he was surprised when he glanced back and saw the swoop coming up fast on his tail. He was further surprised to see his pursuer was not Nuru Kungurama, but the largest member of the swoop gang that he had bombed and left for dead. But then he noticed the small, blue-skinned boy seated in front of the giant biker, and he was even more surprised. Not only had the giant survived the blast, but he was apparently allied with the Jedi, if only for the moment.

Shiv calculated that the more powerful swoop would overtake him in seconds. He popped open a control panel that was built into the left handlebar and pressed a button.

Nuru and Gizz were less than thirty meters behind the speeder bike and gaining fast when they both saw more than a dozen small objects eject from behind the biker's saddle. As the objects fell away from the bike and bounced across the hard ground, Gizz muttered, "Aw, poodoo."

The objects were compact concussion grenades. Nuru doubted that Gizz would be able to swerve around the explosives, not at their present speed. Without warning, Gizz

Ryder Windham

jerked the controls and launched the swoop into a steep ascent just as the nearest grenades detonated. Nuru squinted his eyes as he found himself unexpectedly facing Vaced's sun, and then a blast of hot dust caught the swoop's tail, jouncing the riders as they continued to race for the sky. The remaining grenades detonated in a rippling series of explosions beneath them.

Gizz struggled with the swoop's controls, briefly leveling off before he steered into a dive. Nuru saw they were descending straight at the speeder bike, which flew like a dart, close to its own shadow, dangerously low over the ground, heading for the mouth of a ravine. Gizz held his course behind the sniper but stayed well above the ground to avoid traveling into the path of more grenades.

They followed the speeder bike into the ravine. Nuru had never before seen anything quite like the vibrantly colorful rock formations that lined the walls, but thanks to his education at the Jedi Temple, he recognized them as petrified trees. Most were columnar formations, but some ancient boughs and limbs had transformed into strangely twisted, sharp-edged coils of intertwined tone

Nuru saw the swoop's shadow snaking along the rocky wall to his left. As they followed the biker through a bend in the ravine, the shadow began gliding rapidly downward over the rocks, and Nuru realized it was about to slide into the sniper's visual range. Not wanting to alert the sniper to the swoop's position, Nuru was about to caution Gizz when he noticed Gizz had just removed one hand from the swoop's controls so he could draw his blaster pistol. Gizz fired at the same moment that the swoop's shadow slid across the ravine floor, right in front of the speeder bike.

Evidently, the sniper saw the shadow because he swerved slightly for no other apparent reason. As the fired energy bolt sailed past his shoulder and slammed into the ground, the sniper held tight to the controls with one hand while yanking his blaster rifle free from its sling, then swiftly tilted the weapon back so its

STAR WARS: Duel at Shattered Rock

long barrel rested against his shoulder. Without glancing back, he squeezed the trigger, launching an energy bolt straight at Nuru and Gizz.

Nuru saw the incoming bolt and calculated that it would strike Gizz's upper body. Because Gizz only had one hand on the swoop's controls, Nuru had just enough elbow room to draw and ignite his lightsaber. He extended the blade forward at a sharp angle, and the fired bolt smacked into the blade and rebounded into the ravine wall.

"Don't kill him, Gizz!" Nuru said. "I need to question him!"

"Son of a nerf herder!" Gizz roared at the sight of the lightsaber. Still holding his blaster, he said, "You're a Jedi?"

"Look out!" Nuru cried as he deactivated his blade and pushed against Gizz's left wrist. The swoop tilted hard to the left just in time to avoid striking a broad overhanging limb of a petrified tree.

"You got nothing on me!" Gizz said as he bolstered his blaster. Returning both hands to the control bars, he continued, "I wasn't anywhere near the Zygian Savings and Loan on Treydon II three months ago!"

"I don't know what you're talking about. We're both after the sniper, remember?"

"Oh. Right. The sniper."

As Gizz steered around a bend and the swoop hurtled past more stony limbs, Nuru said, "I've lost him."

"My nose hasn't." Gizz lifted a thick finger away from a handlebar and pointed downward. "Look there."

Nuru followed Gizz's gaze and saw the sniper racing across the bottom of the ravine, deftly steering his speeder past a cluster of immense boulders. The sniper zipped into a dark chasm. Nuru said, "Where does that gap lead?"

"Nowhere!" Gizz snorted. "We've got him trapped!" He kicked the foot pedals and descended after the speeder bike. Nuru felt his stomach clench as Gizz took a steep shortcut

Ryder Windham

through a tangle of rock formations before he leveled off fast, barely three meters off the ground.

They were zooming toward the chasm when Nuru sensed danger, and then a sudden pang of dread. A moment later, the sniper launched out of the chasm, heading straight for the swoop, with his rifle held forward. Nuru was still registering the fact that the sniper must have circled back within the chasm when the sniper fired.

Gizz was hunched forward on the swoop. Both hands gripping the control bars, his body practically wrapped around Nuru, leaving the Jedi unable to draw his lightsaber without harming the monstrous biker. All Nuru could do was duck as the energy bolt smashed into Gizz's upper chest. Gizz howled in pain and rage. The sniper fired again, and the swoop's control vanes exploded into metal shreds.

And then Nuru had a clear view of the figure on the speeder bike. He was startled that the figure was clad in the unmistakable armor of a Mandalorian warrior.

The damaged swoop plunged toward the ravine's floor. Nuru was confident that he could leap away safely, but was less certain that he could do anything to help Gizz. Before Nuru could do anything, he was caught in the crook of Gizz's left arm, and then the giant tumbled off the swoop, taking Nuru with him.

The swoop hit the ground and exploded at the same moment that Gizz's body struck the ground with an ugly thud and rolled across hard rock, his arms wrapped protectively around Nuru. They rolled over a wide patch of dead weeds and didn't stop rolling until Gizz smacked into the base of an enormous, multicolored boulder.

Hudu Shiv raced past the boulder where the young Jedi lay motionless with the swoop biker. He glanced back, and then brought his bike to a shuddering stop. Count Dooku had instructed Shiv not to reveal his Mandalorian identity to the Jedi or clone troopers on Vaced, and Shiv silently cursed himself for

STAR WARS: Duel at Shattered Rock

having entered a chasm with only one exit. He was certain that the Jedi had gotten a good look at his armor, but he did not know whether the boy had survived the fall from the swoop. Shiv knew what to do next. He gunned the bike's engine and turned around, heading back toward the boulder.

Nuru opened his eyes and saw the sky directly above him. He was lying on his back across Gizz's chest, pinned under the heavy weight of Gizz's right arm. He groaned, although Gizz had absorbed most of the impact when they hit the ground. But he could hardly blame Gizz for pulling him off the swoop, for it seemed Gizz had only been trying to prevent Nuru from dying in a fiery crash.

"Gizz? Can you hear me?" Gizz did not respond, but Nuru felt the giant's chest swell slightly. He was still breathing.

Nuru heard the sniper's speeder bike grow louder as it approached. The bike's whining engine sounded as if it were on the other side of the boulder, and Nuru imagined the sniper was circling back. He shoved at Gizz's arm and rolled off the giant. Snatching his lightsaber from his belt, he activated its blade as he stepped through the long-dead weeds, moving away from Gizz, and then waited for the speeder bike to appear from around the boulder.

As expected, the speeder bike glided into view. However, Nuru was surprised to see the bike's saddle was empty. The bike was automatically slowing to a stop when Nuru sensed something move behind him. Nuru realized the sniper had used the bike as a decoy. He turned fast and saw the sniper standing only four meters away, his rifle leveled at Nuru.

The sniper fired, but Nuru had already leaped high into the air. As Nuru executed a flip that briefly planted his feet against the boulder, he noted that it was not an energy bolt that left the sniper's rifle but a slender projectile, possibly a dart. Holding his lightsaber in his right hand so its blade was tucked dangerously close to the side of his body, he kicked off from the boulder, flipped again, and landed on his feet directly behind the sniper.

Ryder Windham

Hudu Shiv had studied holorecordings of Jedi in action and was not surprised by Kungurama's speed or acrobatic ability. Still, he regretted that he had not been able to fell Kungurama with a tranquilizer dart. Without turning to face the boy, he shifted his grip on his rifle as he repositioned his feet, bracing himself before he made a sudden jabbing motion that sent his rifle's butt straight into Nuru's sternum.

Nuru stumbled back but managed to swing his blade up through the butt and trigger mechanism of the sniper's rifle. The sniper threw the damaged rifle at Nuru. Nuru dodged the rifle and was about to leap forward when the sniper extended one fist and activated the flamethrower built into his gauntlet.

The blast of flame struck the ground in front of Nuru. Nuru leaped again, somersaulting in the air to land beside the sniper. Holding his lightsaber away from his body, he slapped his free hand down on the sniper's gauntlet, forcing the jet of flames away from both of them. But then the sniper rotated his arm, deactivating the flamethrower as he grabbed Nuru's right wrist. The sniper twisted hard, forcing Nuru's hand back and causing the Jedi's fingers to lose their grip on his lightsaber. The lightsaber's blade flickered out as it fell to the ground. The sniper kept his grip locked on Nuru's wrist as he brought one knee up into the boy's stomach.

Nuru felt the wind get knocked out of him. He blocked the pain from his mind and reached fast with his left hand to his belt. His fingers wrapped around Ring Sol-Ambase's lightsaber. The sniper was about to kick him again when Nuru thumbed the lightsaber's activation switch and the blade blazed to life.

All Nuru had to do was flick his wrist and the sniper would be cut in half. But he wanted to subdue the sniper and question him, nor kill him. He took a fraction of a second to readjust his grip on Ambase's lightsaber as he prepared to deliver a strike that would only injure the man, but that fraction was enough for him to lose his advantage.

STAR WARS: Duel at Shattered Rock

The sniper shoved Nuru away from him. The lightsaber's blade flashed past the sniper's chest as Nuru stumbled back. The sniper's hands flew to his belt, and he drew both blaster pistols. Nuru recovered his footing and kept Ambase's lightsaber in front of him, waiting for the sniper to open fire.

They both heard the sound of an approaching starship. Nuru recognized the familiar sound of the *Hasty Harpy's* engines. He was not surprised that Breakout Squad had been able to locate him so fast as the rising flames and smoke from the ruined swoop must have drawn their attention.

Keeping his gaze on the armored man and Ambase's lightsaber extended, Nuru reached out with the Force to make his own lightsaber fly up from the ground and land in his waiting palm. He activated his lightsaber so its blade blazed beside the other. He had little doubt that he could deflect blaster bolts faster than the man could squeeze his triggers. He said, "Surrender at once."

He did not expect the sniper to fire low, launching a stream of energy bolts that hammered at the rocky ground in front of Nuru's feet. The blasts kicked stones and sand up into the air, spraying dust into his eyes, and he reflexively squeezed his eyes shut. Fortunately, he remained alert, using the Force to guide his actions and anticipate the next attack.

But it did not come. Instead, the armored man ran for his speeder bike.

Eyes still closed, Nuru sensed the sniper's departure and ran blindly after him, relying on the Force to maintain his course and allow him to visualize the terrain, his opponent, and the bike. Because he had already learned the hard way that the sniper was an incredibly skilled up-close fighter he chose not to tackle him. He leaped high into the air, holding both lightsabers out and away from his body, and somersaulted over the sniper, angling himself to land beside the bike. As he descended, both lightsabers swept through the bike's maneuvering fins and central repulsor pod, crippling the vehicle. He landed on his feet at the

Ryder Windham

same moment that the ruined speeder crashed to the ground, and then he opened his eyes, which still stung from the sand.

The sniper took a quick sidestep and darted out of sight around the boulder that loomed beside Gizz, whose unconscious form still rested amid the weeds. Nuru heard the *Harpy's* landing jets. The freighter touched down close enough for him to see Gunn and Chatterbox in the cockpit.

Brandishing blaster rifles. Knuckles, Sharp, and Cleaver rushed out of the *Harpy* and ran over to Nuru. Knuckles said, "We got Breaker. Are you all right. Commander?"

Nuru responded with a single nod, although the truth was he felt battered and bruised. "The sniper ran behind that boulder," he said as he switched off Ambase's lightsaber and returned it to his belt. "Did you see him? He's wearing Mandalorian armor."

"Mandalorian?" Knuckles said with disbelief. Like most Republic troopers, he was aware of the warrior culture that had lasted thousands of years in the Mandalore sector. He also knew that Jango Fett himself had been a Mandalorian and that Fett's own armor had served as the basis for the armor worn by Knuckles and his comrades. "But Mandalore is a peaceful world now," Knuckles continued. "Maybe he's a renegade or an impostor."

Sharp said, "Or maybe a former Mandalorian warrior, like Jango Fett."

"Whoever he is, he knows how to fight," Nuru said. "What's the condition of Sommilor and his men? And who's watching them?"

Knuckles and Sharp looked at Nuru through their visors. Knuckles said, "Sorry, Commander. We thought you knew. Sommilor and the pilots are dead."

Nuru was stunned. "What?"

"The toxic darts that hit them were lethal. We secured their bodies inside their ship. We didn't—"

Knuckles was interrupted by a loud roar that came from behind the boulder. A spray of burning fuel launched out across

STAR WARS: Duel at Shattered Rock

the dead weeds that blanketed the ground. Nuru realized the sniper had activated his flamethrower again, and as the weeds caught fire, he saw the flames licking toward Gizz's body. He pointed at Gizz and said, "Get him out of there!"

Without questioning the command. Knuckles, Sharp, and Cleaver jumped through the rising flames while Nuru kept his eyes peeled for the sniper. The two troopers and the droid grabbed the giant and dragged him away from the boulder as fast as they could, stomping at the flames as they went. The fire was still spreading as they neared the *Harpy*.

Nuru was backing away from the fire, saw that it was still spreading, and said, "Get him into the ship."

Knuckles said, "Commander, are you sure we should—?"

"He saved my life!"

The troopers and the droid hauled Gizz up the *Harpy's* boarding ramp and were struggling to maneuver him through the hatch when Nuru saw the sniper emerge at the other side of the boulder, moving past the remains of the speeder bike. The sniper was still gripping both of his blaster pistols.

Nuru raised his left hand and used the Force to push the sniper off his feet. The sniper was flung sideways through the air and might have crashed against the ravine wall except he fired his jetpack and launched skyward, rapidly rising higher than Nuru could jump. Nuru held his lightsaber steadily as the sniper ascended, ready to defend himself if his opponent opened fire.

Shiv grimaced behind his helmet as he lifted away from the Jedi. He had only intended to find out whether the boy was still alive and shoot a tranquilizer dart to subdue him if necessary, hut not to engage him in combat. He imagined Dooku would be furious, but that was not Shiv's immediate concern. He could not permit anyone to claim and analyze the Death Watch arsenal on his abandoned bike.

As he continued to rise, he reached to his belt and tapped a button, triggering a remote detonator. Down below, the remains

Ryder Windham

of his bike exploded into fire and dust, and the power of the blast sent the Jedi sprawling. Seeing the Jedi tumble away from the explosion, Shiv realized he was disappointed by his first encounter with a Jedi. He wondered whether he would ever get a chance to duel with the one who was mature.

Shiv scanned the terrain for his *Pursuer*-class enforcement ship and found it right where he had landed it. He flew straight toward the ship.

The fleeing sniper had just moved out of sight as Nuru pushed himself up off the ground. The air was now heavy with smoke. A moment later, he felt hands grab his upper arms, and he was yanked to his feet. Slightly dazed, he realized Knuckles and Sharp had come back for him.

As the clones rushed him back to the *Harpy*, Nuru gasped, "Have to stop him." They were no sooner up the boarding ramp when the *Harpy* lifted off and shot up and out of the ravine.

Nuru, Knuckles, and Sharp stumbled into the main hold. They found Cleaver busily strapping Gizz's body to the deck beside Breaker, who was strapped to a bunk. Both Gizz and Breaker remained unconscious. Cleaver looked up at Nuru and said, "I had to secure this man to the deck because the *Harpy* isn't equipped with a bunk large enough for him."

Nuru was so focused on apprehending the sniper that he barely heard the droid. He left the hold and moved fast to the cockpit. Stepping up behind Gunn and Chatterbox, he crouched down between their seats so he had a better view through the window in front of them. He saw the sniper still airborne, less than thirty meters in front of the *Harpy*.

"That jetpack can't carry him far," Nuru said. "He'll have to land soon."

"I could bring him down right now if you want," Gunn said as she gestured to the controls for the laser cannons,

"No! I want him alive for questioning."

Gunn sighed. "Have it your way."

STAR WARS: Duel at Shattered Rock

Nuru leaned forward to get a wider view of the land below. He spotted an angular transport that rested beside the base of a cliff in the canyon. He recognized the model as a *Pursuer*-class enforcement ship, used by Mandalorians as a patrol and transport vessel, but also popular with various police forces and bounty hunters throughout the galaxy. He said, “There’s a ship down there. He must be heading—”

Nuru was surprised yet again by a sudden feeling of imminent danger. Before he could warn Gunn to take evasive action, the flying man executed a midair twist, faced the Harpy, and bent at the waist.

Nuru shouted, “No!”

But the man clad in Mandalorian armor had already launched the missile from his jetpack.

Chapter Ten

The explosion was tremendous. The Z-6 antivehicle homing missile had struck and detonated with a thunderous boom against the *Hasty Harpy's* lower hull. Lab Gunn screamed as if her own body had taken the hit directly, while Chatterbox clung to the controls in front of him. Nuru, who had not been belted into a seat, was thrown off his feet and bounced off the cockpit's low ceiling.

Another explosion rocked the *Harpy*. Nuru gripped the back of Chatterbox's seat and pulled himself up off the deck. Through the cockpit's window, he saw they were plunging rapidly toward the canyon called Shattered Rock.

Chatterbox said, "We're losing altitude."

Desperately pushing switches and levers as she checked a status readout, Gunn replied, "Tell me something I don't know already!"

"We lost all shields, landing jets, and the primary port thruster."

"I know that, too, so just shut up!" Gunn wrestled with the controls to stabilize the ship. An awful mechanical groan rumbled through the *Harpy* as Gunn somehow brought the nose up.

STAR WARS: Duel at Shattered Rock

Through the window, Nuru was relieved to see they were no longer falling toward Vaced, but the ship was still listing hard to the left. "You have to bring us down, Gunn. I can't let the assassin get away."

"Maybe you didn't hear, kid, but *he blew away away landing jets!* I'm gonna have to make an emergency landing, and I'm betting it will hurt. You should have let me blast him when I had the chance!"

Nuru knew that Gunn's ship was equipped with escape pods. He was about to suggest that they evacuate when he remembered Gizz back in the main hold. Gizz could barely fit through the *Harpy's* main hatch, let alone any of the escape pods.

"You can bring us down safely, Gunn," Nuru said. "I know you can."

"I can't tell you how much that means to me," Gunn said sarcastically.

Nuru frowned. It was bad enough that he had failed to protect Sommilor and the two Kynachi pilots, but now he had endangered everyone on the *Harpy*, too. He suddenly felt an almost overwhelming sense of failure.

And yet, he still wanted to go after the assassin. He knew he had made a terrible mistake in underestimating the man's fighting ability, but now he wondered if he had also erred in trying to capture the man alive.

Should I have tried to kill him?

Deep within himself, Nuru felt something stir, a strange sensation that was neither warm nor cold but... dark.

The *Harpy* wobbled as it tore across the sky, trailing fire and smoke.

Hudu Shiv glanced back at the disabled freighter as his jetpack carried him down to Vaced's surface. If the Jedi and other passengers on the freighter considered themselves lucky to be still alive, Shiv would take credit for that. After all, he had aimed

Ryder Windham

his missile at the lower hull, not at the cockpit or anywhere near the fuel tanks.

He descended close to his *Pursuer*, killed the jetpack, and hit the ground running. He used a remote to deactivate the ship's security system, entered the ship fast, and grabbed some equipment. He knew if Nuru Kungurama survived, the boy would alert his superiors about seeing a man wearing Mandalorian armor on Vaced. Shiv would do what was necessary to discourage the Jedi from ever hunting him down.

The *Hasty Harpy* was listing hard but still airborne. In the cockpit, Nuru had belted himself into a seat behind Gum. and Chatterbox. Over the intercom, they heard Knuckles say, "We've got a fire in the aft hold, Captain."

"Then put it out!" Gunn snapped. She glanced at one of the few scopes that was still working. "The terrain-following sensor is blown, but I still got eyes. I'll bring her down in the field between the spaceport and the woods." She tilted her chin back toward the intercom. "Listen up, everyone! It's too late for fire fighting! Buckle up now because we're gonna—"

A hail of laserfire streaked past the cockpit, and then a stream of energy bolts smashed into the *Harpy's* upper hull, startling everyone in the cockpit. "Stang!" Gunn cursed as the *Harpy* buckled at the impact. "Who's shooting at us *now*?"

A moment later, the attacking ship zoomed over the *Harpy* and swung into view. It was the *Pursuer*-class ship that Nuru had seen earlier. He had no doubt that the armored assassin was piloting the craft, and that his goal was to bring down the *Harpy*.

"That tears it," Gunn snarled as she shoved the controls, sending the *Harpy* into a sudden roll that caused the engines to howl. The *Harpy* belched black smoke as she emerged from the roll and lifted up behind the *Pursuer*. Nuru saw Gunn reach to a red switch on the weapons console. He did not try to stop her from pressing it.

STAR WARS: Duel at Shattered Rock

The *Harpy's* missile launchers fired. Two homing missiles zinged toward the *Pursuer*, which banked suddenly to the left. The missiles raced after the targeted ship, then arced out slightly before they accelerated, each angling for a different side of the *Pursuer*. The missiles slammed into the ship and detonated. The *Pursuer* erupted in a bright burst that sent blazing debris across the sky over Shattered Rock.

Gunn let out a whistle. "That felt pretty good," she said as she banked back toward the spaceport. "Now comes the rough part."

Gunn punched the accelerator and pressed a switch, and the *Harpy* lurched up. An alarm began wailing, Nuru could not tell whether it came from the spaceport or the cockpit. The *Harpy* wobbled as she glided over the landing pads, banked hard as she crossed over the adjoining field, and then dropped.

The *Harpy* skidded across the ground, crushing the high grasses and leaving a rough trench in her wake. She shuddered violently and came to a stop, just as the firefighter droids arrived from the spaceport.

"End of the road," Gunn said dismally.

Nuru released his safety belt. "I'm going check on the others." He went back to the main hold, where he found Sharp and Knuckles already working to release the unconscious Gizz from the floor. Breaker's eyes were open, and Cleaver was helping him up from the bunk. Breaker shook his head and said, "Did I miss something?"

"We'll fill you in after we're all outside," Nuru said, gesturing to the main hatch. But as he turned, he noticed a leather utility belt lying on the deck. He picked up the belt and looked at it with astonishment. "Where did this come from?"

"I found it near Breaker in the woods," Cleaver said. "I'm sorry I neglected to mention it, but we were a bit rushed. I suspect it belonged to the sniper."

Nuru continued staring at the belt for a moment, then reached to his own belt and removed Ring Sol-Ambase's lightsaber. He secured the lightsaber to a clip on the belt that

Ryder Windham

Cleaver had recovered. “No, Cleaver. This didn’t belong to the sniper.”

The belt had three attached pouches. Two were empty. One was not.

“What the skrag hit me?” Gizz moaned as he sat up on the ground a few meters from the wreckage of the *Hasty Harpy*, where Cleaver was helping the firefighting droids extinguish the small fires that were still burning.

“Take it easy, Gizz,” Nuru said. “You might have a concussion.”

Gizz looked at Nuru, and then noticed the four clone troopers who stood nearby, listening to an official from the spaceport. The troopers had removed their helmets. Gizz blinked his eyes and scowled. “Something’s wrong with my vision. I’m seeing quadruple.”

Nuru grinned. “They’re clones.”

“Oh,” Gizz said. “Hey, what happened to that armored guy we went after, the one who blasted my swoop?”

Nuru nodded. “He’s dead.”

“This day’s just getting better.” Gizz yawned. “I got a whopping headache. I’m gonna rest my eyes a bit.” He lay back on the ground and began snoring almost immediately.

Nuru looked over to the spaceport official, who was a stern-looking man. The man said, “I should have known Gizz was involved in this crash. Ever since he arrived on Vaced, he’s been trouble. And no one’s going to mourn that gang he hung out with.”

Nuru shook his head. “Gizz isn’t responsible for what happened here.”

“Well, I got plenty of other reasons to send him to prison! Disturbing the peace, public insobriety, failure to pay debts.,” “Glancing at Gizz’s slumbering form, he continued, “I’m going to see to it that Gizz goes straight to some off-world prison, maybe the Spice Mines of Kessel. Keep an eye on him while I get

STAR WARS: Duel at Shattered Rock

some chains.” He turned and headed for one of the buildings at the spaceport.

When the man was out of earshot, Nuru said, “We’re leaving. Now.”

“You got a weird sense of humor, kid,” Gunn said.

“I’m serious. We’ll take Sommilor’s ship. We’ll take the bodies of Sommilor and his pilots with us.”

“Back to Coruscant?” Sharp said.

“Not immediately.” Nuru held out the utility belt. “This is Master Ambase’s. Cleaver found it in the woods near Breaker. The assassin must have dropped it. And I found *this* in one of the utility pouches.” He reached into a pocket and pulled out a small disc-shaped device. It was an imagecaster, a compact hologram projector. He activated the imagecaster and a holograph readout materialized above the disc. The readout was a three-dimensional map of the Bilbringi system, complete with navigational coordinates. “Bilbringi Depot isn’t far from here. Maybe the assassin brought my Master to Bilbringi and left him there. I need to find out.”

“Begging your pardon, Commander,” Sharp said, “but shouldn’t we contact the authorities on Coruscant first and let them know what happened to Sommilor and his pilots?”

“No,” Nuru said sharply, “No transmissions to Coruscant. Someone has been tracking us across space, possibly manipulating our movements. We never did find the transmitter on the *Harpy*, but I am not taking any more chances, we’ll contact the authorities *after* we investigate Bilbringi.”

“You’re crazy, kid,” Gunn said. “How do you know the assassin didn’t leave that belt behind on purpose? Maybe he was trying to lure you and the rest of us into a trap on Bilbringi!”

“I considered that possibility,” Nuru admitted as he deactivated the imagecaster. “But the fact that the assassin attacked the *Harpy* suggests otherwise. I don’t believe he was trying to lead us anywhere. He was trying to kill us. We may

Ryder Windham

never know who he was or what his motives were, but we know he won't harm anyone again."

"Well, count me out, anyway," Gunn said. "You helped get me off of Kynachi, and in return, I took you to Chiss space and back. But if I'd known I'd be making a detour to a black hole, tangling with space pirates, chasing a killer wearing a missile on his back, and that the *Harpy* would wind up like this..." She gestured to her ruined ship and shook her head. "Forget it. I'll find some other way off Vaced. I'm through traveling with you."

Nuru sighed. "I'm sorry about the *Harpy*. I promise, when I return to Coruscant, I will submit a request to the Jedi Council to have the Republic reimburse you for—"

"You're assuming you'll *ever* return to Coruscant," Gunn interrupted. "What good is promise if you go to Bilbringi and you get yourself and everyone else killed?!"

"That's enough, Lalo," Chatterbox said.

Everyone looked at Chatterbox. He had never addressed Gunn by her first name before.

"Sorry, Nuru," Gunn said quietly, "I trust your promise is good." Then she stepped up close to Chatterbox, looked him straight in the eye, and said, "I'd ask you to stay with me, but I already know your answer. So long, Chatterbox." She turned and started to move away.

Chatterbox grabbed Gunn's arm and pulled her back to him. He kissed her. She kissed him back.

Knuckles checked his rifle. Breaker looked up at the sky. Sharp lowered his head and stared at his boots. Nuru fidgeted with the imagecaster. Cleaver walked over from the wreckage and said, "The fires are all out."

"Nor from where I'm standing," Gunn said as she drew away from Chatterbox. She reached up, rapped his lips, and said, "Be careful with that mouth of yours." She glanced at the other members of Breakout Squad and said, "Bye, boys."

Sharp said, "Where will you go?"

STAR WARS: Duel at Shattered Rock

"I might just call an old friend to give me a lift." Then Gunn walked off toward the spaceport with her head held high. She did not look back.

Knuckles looked at the sleeping giant and said, "Do we just leave him there?"

"He may have a criminal record," Nuru said, "but he *did* save me from a nasty crash. I imagine he might be quite grateful if he doesn't wake up in prison."

Sharp said, "You're not suggesting we take him with us?"

Nuru nodded. "I'm trusting my instincts, Sharp. I suspect Gizz hasn't had an easy life. I believe he deserves another chance," He looked at Chatterbox and said, "You spent a lot of hours in the *Harpy's* cockpit. Think you can fly Sommilor's freighter?"

Chatterbox nodded.

"Good. Now, let's get going before that spaceport guy comes back."

As they hauled Gizz to Sommilor's freighter, no one noticed the small, gray magnetic cylinder that was still attached to Cleaver's left leg.

Almost half an hour after the *Hasty Harpy* crashed in the grassy field on Vaced, the Suwantek Systems freighter lifted off, carrying a young Jedi, four Republic troopers, a refurbished droid commando, a giant named Gizz, and the bodies of three dead men from Kynachi. As the freighter ascended from Vaced Spaceport, a lone man, standing on a plateau at Shattered Rock, watched the departure through his macrobinoculars.

Hudu Shiv lowered the macrobinoculars. Satisfied that the Jedi and his allies had left the planet, he walked over to the emergency lifeboat that rested nearby. He had disengaged the lifeboat from his *Pursuer* just before he had used a remote control transmitter to send the *Pursuer* after Kungurama's ship. And then, after using the remote to fire a few blasts at Kungurama's ship, he had allowed the *Pursuer* to be destroyed.

Ryder Windham

Shiv imagined Count Dooku would express displeasure when he learned Nuru Kungurama had sighted a Mandalorian warrior on Vaced. However, Shiv had covered his trail by faking his own death and had also accomplished his primary goals. The men from Kynachi were dead, and a Jedi utility belt had been left at the shooting site.

Shiv climbed into the lifeboat. He had already plotted a course for a nearby space station where he would be picked up by a covert Death Watch transport. He punched the ignition, and the lifeboat launched from the plateau, leaving a trail of water vapor as it raced up through the atmosphere.

He wondered if he might cross paths with Nuru Kungurama again. As much as Shiv prided himself for being a professional, he could not deny he wanted another crack at the Jedi who had failed to kill him.

Chapter Eleven

“You got any more food on this ship?” the giant, Gizz, asked.

“No, Gizz,” Nuru said. “You ate it all.”

“Oh.” Gizz scratched his stomach. “The station you said we’re going to ...”

“Bilbringi Depot.”

“Yeah, Bilbringi. We can get more food there, right?” Gizz added.

“I hope so.”

They were sitting on a bench beside a console in the cargo bay of the Suwantek Systems freighter. Nuru had directed the troopers to place Gizz in the cargo bay because the passenger compartments did not have sufficient headroom for the giant. The bodies of Sommilor and the two pilots had been neatly bagged and carefully stowed in the bay’s airtight storage chamber. A nearby window offered a view of hyperspace as they raced to their destination.

Nuru looked at a chronometer on the nav console and said, “We’ll be exiting hyperspace soon.”

“Thanks for not leaving me on Vaced. I overheard the clones talking. They said that I might have woken up in chains or in prison. You didn’t have to bring me with you.”

Ryder Windham

"You didn't have to pull me off that swoop before it crashed at Shattered Rock."

Gizz shrugged. "Don't give me too much credit. I was probably just saving myself at the time and took you with me." He looked at the window. "I've never been to Bilbringi Depot, but I've heard about it. It's on an asteroid owned by a Hutt named Drixo. Tell me again, why are we going there?"

"I'm searching for my Jedi Master. I have reason to believe he may have been taken to Bilbringi, and—"

"Excuse me, Commander," Breaker interrupted as he entered the cargo bay. "We may have a situation." He walked over to the nav console and pressed a series of buttons. "See here."

Nuru got up from the bench and examined the console's data display. "What's this? Frequency readouts?"

"Wait."

And then Nuru saw a tiny green circle flash on the display. Nuru's eyes went wide. Calming himself, he said, "So ... Sommilor's ship is carrying a hidden transmitter. You just discovered this?"

Breaker nodded. "Commander, we don't know what to expect at Bilbringi Depot, but thanks to that transmitter, it's entirely possible that someone at Bilbringi is expecting *us*."

Gizz lifted his girth off the bench and said, "I got news for you, clone. No one at Bilbringi is expecting *me*." He placed a massive hand on Nuru's shoulder. "If anyone's messing with my little buddy here, they're in for a galaxy of pain."

"In that case," Breaker said, "I guess we have nothing to worry about."

The freighter dropped out of hyperspace in the Bilbringi system. Nuru had joined Chatterbox in the cockpit, and he watched as the freighter moved past countless asteroids toward the largest one, designated Bilbringi VII, the home of Bilbringi Depot.

STAR WARS: Duel at Shattered Rock

Nuru had informed the other members of Breakout Squad about the transmission signal that Breaker had discovered. “Easy does it, Chatterbox,” Nuru said as they neared Bilbringi VII. “We don’t know for a fact whether some enemy is waiting for us. For all we know, we may appear on their scopes as an ordinary freighter.”

Soon, they were able to make out details of the depot through the cockpit window. Bright lights illuminated a cluster of landing pads, modular structures, and docking bays. And then Nuru spotted the barges and a large Metalorn yacht.

Nuru gasped. “That’s Overseer Umbrag’s ship.” He hit the intercom. “Umbrag’s at Bilbringi Depot. No Separatist warships in sight, just some drone barges and Umbrag’s yacht. Knuckles and Sharp, are the laser cannons primed?”

“Yes, Commander,” Knuckles responded.

“Breaker?”

“I’m all set with Cleaver and Gizz, Commander.”

“We’re about to dock,” Nuru said. “Be ready for anything.”

Gizz added, “I don’t even know who Umbrag is, but I’m itching to clobber him.”

Overseer Umbrag was lounging in Drixo the Hurt’s former lair, playing a starfighter hologame, when he heard a clamor from the outer corridor.

A moment later, he heard the clattering approach of a battle droid. The droid said, “A Suwantek Systems freighter just arrived, sir.”

Without looking up from his game, Umbrag said, “Tell them the same thing you said to the other ships that tried to dock after us. Tell them the depot is under quarantine.”

“I tried telling them, sir. But they didn’t listen. They just blasted me.”

“What?” Umbrag looked at the droid through his thick goggles and was startled to see both of its arms had been blown off. “This is an outrage! Who dared to defy my order?!”

Ryder Windham

“Well, there were a few Republic troopers, a very angry giant, a young Jedi, and a droid commando who doesn’t seem to be on our side anymore.”

“A Jedi?” Umbrag said nervously. “Did he have blue skin and red eyes?”

A voice bellowed from behind the dismembered droid, “You must be Umbrag.” Umbrag looked past the droid, saw an orange-skinned humanoid monster standing beside Nuru Kungurama, and fainted.

“That battle went much more easily than I imagined it would,” Cleaver said.

“No kidding,” Knuckles added. “If you ask me, it was too easy. I’m just disappointed we couldn’t find any evidence that General Ambase was ever here.”

“The fight might not be over yet,” Breaker said as he tossed a battle droid’s head into a pile of droid parts they had collected on Bilbringi Depot. “We blasted eleven droids, but they may have arrived here as an even dozen.”

“If there’s a straggler, we’ll get him, too,” Sharp said confidently. He gestured to the pile of vanquished droids. “It doesn’t make sense. Why would the Separatists take over Bilbringi Depot, then leave only a few battle droids to defend it?”

Chatterbox responded with a shrug. Breaker said, “Maybe Umbrag will tell us when he regains consciousness.”

Breakout Squad was standing in the Bilbringi Depot docking bay next to their appropriated freighter. The troopers had removed their helmets. Gizz walked past them, carrying Umbrag over one shoulder as he headed for the freighter’s boarding ramp. Nuru stood at the base of the ramp and said, “Thanks, Gizz. You can put him in the hold for now.”

“Gladly,” Gizz replied as he carried Umbrag into the ship.

Nuru walked over to the troopers and Cleaver. “I transmitted a message to the Jedi Council. I told them what happened on

STAR WARS: Duel at Shattered Rock

Vaced and also here at the depot. A Republic cruiser should arrive here shortly to transport us back to Coruscant.”

Knuckles said, “What about Sommilor’s ship?”

“It will likely be taken to Kynachi, so the men’s bodies can be returned to their families.” Nuru shook his head. “Those men had counted on me to escort them to Coruscant. I’ll never forget my failure on Vaced.”

A silence fell over the group. Gizz stepped out of the freighter, walked past the others, and said, “I’m gonna look for some food.”

As Gizz headed out of the docking bay. Cleaver looked at Nuru and said, “It wasn’t your fault, Commander. You didn’t kill those men. The assassin did. A Jedi can’t save everyone all the time.”

“Cleaver’s right, Commander,” Breaker said. “What’s more, none of us might have survived Kynachi if it weren’t for you.”

“And consider what we *did* accomplish,” Knuckles added. “We finally nabbed Umbrag! And judging from the cargo in his drone barges, it looks like we may have stopped the Separatists from transforming the depot into some kind of manufacturing facility.”

Sharp said, “With any luck, we’ll also get information out of Umbrag that will help us find General Ambase.”

Nuru frowned. Breaker said, “What’s wrong, Commander?”

“Something just occurred to me. When we return to Coruscant, I doubt the Council will encourage me to continue serving with Breakout Squad. I’m sure they’ll assign you to a more experienced leader. I just want you all to know I’ve learned a great deal from you, and ... and I’ll miss you all very much.”

“Commander,” Breaker said, “I think I can speak for all the men, and Cleaver, too, when I say it’s been an honor to serve with—“

Breaker was interrupted by the sound of a starship approaching the docking bay. Turning to see the incoming ship, Nuru was amazed to see a teardrop-shaped transport with a

Ryder Windham

recessed cockpit and a single sharp-tipped maneuvering fin. The ship was enveloped in a luminescent energy field that generated an eerie, pale white light. As the transport glided silently toward the docking bay, Knuckles said, "I've never seen a ship like that before."

"Neither have I," Nuru said. "Put on your helmets, ready your weapons, and take cover." The troopers and Cleaver obeyed, moving quickly behind some nearby cargo containers.

The strange ship slid into the docking bay. No landing gear extended as it came to a hovering stop beside the Suwantek Systems freighter. But then an oval hatch opened and a ramp lowered to the docking bay floor. A girl stepped out. She wore a crisp, black uniform. She had black hair, blue skin, and bright red eyes.

Nuru was stunned. Stepping cautiously forward, he said, "Veeran?"

The girl looked at him quizzically. "Kung'urama'nuruodo."

Hearing her say his actual Chiss name, Num's mouth felt suddenly dry. "You ... I ... I'm sorry. I didn't expect to see you again."

"No, you did not." Without taking her eyes off him, she continued, "Your allies may reveal themselves without apprehension. I traveled alone. I am unarmed. I will not damage them,"

"Of course," Nuru said, although he had a hard time imagining Veeren posing much of a threat to Breakout Squad. "You can come out, men. It's the Aristocra." He noticed Veeren wince slightly at his pronunciation.

The troopers and Cleaver stepped out from behind the cargo containers and moved up beside Nuru. Veeren cast a quick glance at the troopers and the droid, then returned her gaze to Nuru. "Your mechanical translator located the transmitter I placed on Captain Lalo Gunn's freighter."

"What?" Nuru looked at Cleaver. "Cleaver, do you understand what she's talking about?"

STAR WARS: Duel at Shattered Rock

"I believe so." The droid reached down and removed the magnetic cylinder from his thigh. Handing it to Nuru, he said, "I *thought* it was the transmitter. I found it on the hull. It's a good thing Captain Gunn told me to save it for later

Returning his gaze to Veeren, Nuru said, "You put the transmitter on the *Harpy*?"

"I have admitted the fact."

"But... why?"

Veeran looked stung. "Why did I admit this?"

"No," Nuru said, feeling suddenly exasperated. "Why did you plant the transmitter?"

Veeran blinked and lifted her chin a fraction. "It enabled me to follow you across space. I see Captain Lalo Gunn is no longer traveling with you."

"No, she isn't, she ..." Nuru struggled to find words. He realized if Cleaver had not found the transmitter, Veeran might have tracked the device to Gunn's crashed ship on Vaced. He considered telling Veeran about the crash but quickly decided it had little bearing on their current circumstances. "Veeran, may I ask why you followed us all the way from Chiss space?"

"I followed you, Kung'urama'nuruodo, because I am compelled to tell you something of great importance."

Nuru waited. "Yes?"

An analysis of several events, including the Separatist attack on the Chiss Expansionary Defense Force Station Ifpe'a, has determined a high probability that you are an unwitting accomplice to an unknown individual or group whose goal is galactic domination."

Nuru was taken aback. Breaker said, "I beg your pardon, Aristocra, but... you're suggesting someone has been using Commander Nuru? To help conquer the galaxy?"

"Actually," Veeran said, "it is quite possible we are all being manipulated."

The Sith, Nuru thought. *She must be talking about the Sith*. Before he could ask Veeran if she had any knowledge of the existence of

Ryder Windham

the Sith Lords, she faced him and continued, "Although I do not have conclusive evidence, I suspect a conspiracy may date back over eleven of your standard years, when the Jedi discovered you as an infant, adrift in a Chiss escape pod in the Outer Rim. I also suspect that because you are Chiss as well as a Jedi, you are in great danger. Perhaps you should investigate."

Although Nuru thought Veeren's suspicions about a conspiracy were incredible, he said, "You should come with us to Coruscant. We can inform the Jedi Council and—"

"You will tell no one of our conversation," Veeren interrupted "The Chiss Ascendancy is unaware of my data analysis or my suspicions. Except for you and the members of your team, no one else knows I have left Chiss space. I have taken many precautions to maintain secrecy because I believe there is a conspiracy, and spies and assassins could be anywhere. The conspirators will not hesitate to silence anyone who speaks of them or interferes with their plans. If you alert your Jedi Council to anything I have said, you risk my life as well as your own."

"I understand," Nuru said, even though he doubted there were spies in the Jedi Council.

"I must go." Veeren turned abruptly and began walking back to her hovering ship.

"What?" Nuru said. "Wait! Where are you going?"

Veeran stopped and glanced back at him. "I am returning to Chiss space."

"But ... now I *don't* understand. You traveled days to track me down, just to warn me that someone might be trying to take over the galaxy, and then you leave?"

Veeran cocked her head. "It seems that you understand perfectly." And then she resumed walking toward her ship's landing ramp. Nuru suddenly realized he was still clutching the cylindrical transmitter.

Veeran entered her ship. The landing ramp retracted, and the oval hatch sealed. As her ship began gliding out of the docking

STAR WARS: Duel at Shattered Rock

bay, Nuru and Breakout Squad saw another starship approaching from the surrounding asteroid field. The incoming ship's running lights were off.

Ring-Sol Ambase and the clone trooper who claimed his name was Sharp were seated in the cockpit of the Kuat *Corona*-class transport that had just arrived at Bilbringi VII. Their journey from the Bogden system had been long, but Ambase had spent much of the time using Jedi meditation techniques to regain his strength. Still, he was not fully recovered, and because they did not know what they might encounter at Bilbringi Depot, they were being especially cautious. At Ambase's instructions, the clone had switched off the transport's running lights so they could approach the depot with some discretion.

But as they neared one of the docking bays, they sighted a bizarre teardrop-shaped vessel gliding toward them. A warning light flashed on the *Corona's* nav console. The clone said, "We're being scanned, General, but... that ship it... it isn't appearing on our sensors?"

The mysterious vessel suddenly glowed brightly. "It's definitely not a Republic ship," Ambase said with concern. Neither he nor the clone saw the Republic troopers who were in the docking bay beyond the glowing ship.

An alarm sounded from the *Corona's* console panel. "We're picking up massive radiation emissions," the clone said. "They may be charging weapons." The clone's hands flew to the controls for the transport's laser cannon as the glowing ship suddenly increased intensity and accelerated toward the transport.

Three laser beams streaked from the glowing ship and smashed against the *Corona's* shields. Ambase said, "Return fire."

The *Corona's* cannon fired straight at the glowing ship. Ambase had assumed that the bizarre ship was heavily shielded. He was genuinely startled to see the single volley of laser fire cause the ship to explode in a brilliant burst of light.

Ryder Windham

The explosion lifted Nuru, the troopers, and Cleaver off their feet and sent them crashing across the docking bay deck. Nuru dropped the transmitter as he rolled and jumped to his feet. He snatched his lightsaber from his belt and ignited it while stray bits of glowing metal trailed away from the explosion. He gasped. “No.”

The glowing wreckage illuminated the vessel that had destroyed Veeren’s ship. The attacking vessel was a Kuat *Corona*-class transport. Nuru directed his gaze at the transport and shouted, “No!”

Inside the *Corona*, Ring-Sol Ambase sensed a disturbance in the Force, a wave of anger so strong that it jolted him in his seat. He shuddered with the terrible realization that the anger was directed at him and that it came from someone he knew.

Nuru?!

And then he sensed Nuru’s awareness of him. A moment later, he felt an even stronger wave of rage crash over him.

Ambase suddenly feared Count Dooku had been telling the truth about Nuru turning against him. He also knew he was not sufficiently recovered to confront his Padawan,

He looked at the clone beside him and said, “Get us out of here. Now!”

The clone jerked the controls, and the transport raced away from Bilbringi Depot.

The troopers and Cleaver picked themselves up from the docking bay deck and moved toward Nuru, who was still holding his lightsaber and facing a cluster of asteroids where he had lost sight of the *Corona*. Breaker looked at Nuru and said, “Are you all right, Commander?”

Nuru stammered, “My—my Master was on the transport... that fired at Veeren’s ship.”

Cleaver said, “Your Master? General Ambase? But ... why?”

STAR WARS: Duel at Shattered Rock

Breaker looked at the other troopers. He knew that they, like him, had no idea how to proceed. And as they waited for Nuru's next order, none of them noticed the lone bank droid who crept out from blaster rifle. He aimed it at the troopers and opened fire.

"Take *that*, Republic dogs!" the droid said as he shot one trooper in the back. The trooper collapsed, his armored body clattering against the deck.

The other troopers and Cleaver spun fast and were about to return fire when they saw Nuru was already racing straight for the droid, swinging his lightsaber back and forth to deflect the fired energy bolts away from his allies. The droid cried, "Oh, no!" Nuru's blade swept through the droid's neck and torso. The droid's parts fell to the deck.

Nuru darted back to the troopers. The droid's attack had happened so fast that Nuru had not seen which trooper had been shot, but then he heard one of the three unharmed troopers say, "Chatterbox! Can you hear me?" It was Breaker's voice.

Chatterbox groaned.

"Get his helmet off," said Breaker as he carefully rolled Chatterbox over, elevating his shoulders and head while Knuckles plucked an emergency med kit from his belt.

Sharp removed Chatterbox's helmet. Grimacing, Chatterbox gasped out, "I think it's bad."

Just then, Gizz returned to the docking bay. He was carrying a sack that he had stuffed with food rations and was chewing on a large stick of nerf jerky. Seeing the group huddled around the fallen trooper, he said, "Did I miss something?"

Ignoring Gizz, Nuru said, "Sharp and Breaker! Sweep the area! Make sure there aren't any more battle droids!" Nuru returned his attention to helping Chatterbox.

Breaker and Sharp left the others, running past Gizz to the maintenance hatch. Breaker said, "I'll take the hatch. You search the outer corridor." Breaker entered the hatch.

Ryder Windham

Sharp proceeded to the corridor that lay beyond the docking bay. The corridor was empty. Keeping his rifle in front of him, he kept moving until he found a metal door for a storage room. He kicked the door open and jumped in, ready to shoot even a simple cleaning droid. The storage room was also empty.

Sharp glanced back into the corridor, then stepped into the room and shut the door behind him. Leaning against the door, he removed his helmet and took a series of deep breaths. And as he breathed, his facial muscles shifted. His smooth, pale skin changed to a dusky, grayish green. He squeezed his eyes shut, and when he opened them again, they were yellow and reptilian.

He thought of what might have happened to him if he had been shot and the members of Breakout Squad had removed his helmet to see his true face. He shuddered. He knew that now was hardly the time to relax. He still had work to do. The Clawdite shape-shifter took another deep breath, pulled on his helmet, and then made his way back to the clone troopers.

Lalo Gunn pushed her empty glass back and forth across the crackled surface of the bar in the dimly lit tavern at Vaced Spaceport. There were only a few other customers at the bar, and Gunn was ignoring all of them. The bartender, a Qiraash with high cheekbones and a much higher forehead, looked at Gunn and said, "You finished?"

"Oh, I'm finished, all right," Gunn said, shifting on her seat. The bartender took the glass. Gunn placed a credit chip on the bar. She was about to get up when a large man moved up beside her and placed a hand on the shoulder. She glared at the man. He pointed to the raised stool next to hers, and said, "This seat taken?"

"I was just leaving," Gunn said.

"Stay awhile longer," the man said, keeping one hand on her shoulder. "I've got credits. I'll buy us a round of—"

STAR WARS: Duel at Shattered Rock

“If you want to keep your hand,” a deep voice interrupted from behind Gunn, “you’ll remove it from the lady and be on your way.”

The man laughed. “Oh, yeah? Who’s gonna make me?” Grinning broadly, he glanced back to see who was standing behind Gunn. The man’s grin vanished, and he suddenly looked nervous. “I meant no harm, the man said as he yanked his hand away from Gunn and hurried out of the tavern.

“It’s about time you got here,” Gunn said as the newcomer sat down beside her. “When you hired me on Kynachi, I didn’t bargain losing the *Harpy*. You said there’d be a big reward for me if I got Breakout Squad to Vaced. I expect to be well paid.”

“You needn’t worry about your reward,” Cad Bane said with a smile that bared his sharp teeth.

Star Wars: Clone Wars
Secret Missions

Book Four
Guardians of the Chiss Key

Chapter One

Eleven years before the Clone Wars...

“The pirate ship is coming in fast, Count Dooku!” said the captain of the patrol cruiser. “It was lucky you managed to get a tracking device onto their hull.”

“Luck had nothing to do with it, Captain Krempil,” replied the Jedi Master, who had a curved-handled lightsaber clipped to his belt. He stood beside his comrade, Jedi Knight Ring-Sol Ambase, on the patrol cruiser’s bridge. The one-hundred-and-fifty-meter-long cruiser had a tapered bow that bore the yellow-and-blue insignia of the Malarian Alliance and was nestled in the shadow of a large asteroid at the outer edge of a vast asteroid belt that stretched past a cloudy green nebula. Dooku gestured to the asteroids visible through the main viewport and said, “When you have a visual on the *Random Mallet*, target the primary sensor array.”

“Sensor array?” Krempil said with obvious displeasure. “But we could direct all weapons to their engines and blow them clear out of the—”

“No, Captain,” Dooku said politely but firmly. “Just the sensor array.”

And then the *Random Mallet*, the McGrrrr Gang’s battered, hammer-shaped frigate, veered out of the asteroid belt and

Ryder Windham

headed for the nebula. The patrol cruiser dropped out of the asteroid's shadow, sped after the frigate, and fired its laser cannons. The laser bolts struck the fleeing frigate's large sensor array, which blossomed into a bright explosion of fire and twisted metal.

Inside the patrol cruiser, Captain Krempil turned to the two Jedi standing on the bridge and said, "They're making a run for the nebula!"

"We can see that quite clearly, Captain," Dooku replied calmly.

Ring-Sol Ambase, a lean man with silver hair that made him appear almost as old as Dooku, looked past the heads of the cruiser's pilot and navigator to the port side viewport and watched the space pirates' frigate weave past several asteroids before it vanished into the nebula.

"The tracker's no use to us now," Captain Krempil said bitterly. "Our scanners won't work in all that space dust."

"I'm well aware of that, too," Dooku said as he moved behind the navigator's seat. "Bring us to a stop between those asteroids and the edge of the nebula."

The patrol cruiser decelerated and stopped a short distance from the asteroids. Krempil looked at the Jedi and said, "What now? Do we just sit here and wait for the McGrrrr Gang to come out?"

Dooku nodded. "We've already damaged their sensor array, hyperdrive engine, and the starboard directional thrusters. When they grow tired of flying in circles, they'll come out, and then we'll have them."

"What if the McGrrrr Gang doesn't grow tired?"

"They can't stay in the nebula forever, Captain," Ambase said. "Even pirates eventually get hungry."

"I'm not so certain about *these* pirates," Krempil said, "Even without a working hyperdrive, they've managed to evade us for almost three days straight and brought us all the way to the edge

STAR WARS: Guardians of the Chiss Key

of Wild Space. I don't imagine they'll surrender willingly anytime soon."

"I don't expect them to surrender at all," Dooku said, keeping his gaze fixed on the nebula. "They're desperate men. If they can't escape or defeat us, they'll die trying."

Krempil glared at the Jedi. "We had their ship dead in our sights when they left the asteroid belt. Why didn't you let me kill them all when we had the chance?"

Ambase looked at Krempil and said, "The Malarian Alliance requested Jedi assistance to bring the McGrrrr Gang to justice, and we agreed to do that. Jedi only take lives in self-defense or when otherwise defenseless lives are threatened. If the pirates leave us no choice but to destroy their ship, then we shall do what we must."

An alarm chirped from the communication officer's console. The officer switched off the alarm, adjusted her headset, and said, "We're picking up a transmission, Captain. It appears to be originating from just outside the nebula."

Dooku remained at the viewport while Ambase stepped past Krempil and hunkered down over the comm officer's console. Studying the transmission's readout on a sensor scope, Ambase said, "Could it be from the pirates?"

"It doesn't resemble any of their earlier transmissions," the comm officer said. "It sounds like a cross between random noise and atonal music. If it's a language, our computer doesn't recognize it."

"I'd be surprised if the computer *did* recognize it," Dooku said. "After all, we're in uncharted territory. Few Republic ships have ventured this far beyond the Outer Rim."

Ambase pointed to three fluctuations on the sensor scope's readout and said, "Those look like repeat patterns. The transmission is probably an automated recording. Possibly a distress signal."

"Or a warning," Dooku said.

Ryder Windham

“Or a trap,” added Krempil. “The pirates may be trying to distract us.”

“I suspect McGrrrr would have tried something less sophisticated,” Dooku said. Moving back to the viewport, he returned his gaze to the nebula. He gripped the edge of the viewport’s frame as he tilted his head slightly to the pilot and said, “Incoming missile Divert all energy to deflector shields and hang on.”

The pilot had no sooner adjusted the controls for the shields when a thunderous blast rocked the cruiser, tossing Ambase and the crew across the bridge. Ambase sailed over a metal railing and smashed against a bulkhead. The navigational console exploded, and loud alarms began blaring. The pilot tumbled across the deck, grabbed a fire extinguisher, and began spraying down the nav console.

Ambase didn’t need to examine any sensors to know the cruiser had been hit by a concussion missile. Then Ambase heard the viewport window make a terrible cracking noise and felt a sudden rush of air tearing at his robes.

“Pressure breach!” shouted the communications officer.

“Evacuate to the life pods!” said Krempil as he stumbled across the bridge.

“Cancel that command, Captain,” Dooku said calmly as the escaping air whipped at his robe. While Ambase grabbed a cylindrical tank from a bulkhead and began spraying emergency sealant over a crack in the viewport’s window, Dooku moved to an illuminated console and adjusted the controls for the cruiser’s energy shields, redirecting the shields over the breached hull as he increased power to the shield strength. The bridge’s air pressure stabilized quickly.

“Back to your stations!” Krempil shouted as the pilot put out the fire at the nav console. “Direct all weapons on that frigate!”

Ambase looked through the viewport and saw the *Random Mallet’s* aft thrusters fire and then the *Mallet* rapidly receded

STAR WARS: Guardians of the Chiss Key

toward a distant cluster of stars. “Too late,” he said. “The pirates just jumped into hyperspace.”

“What?” Krempil said with surprise, but then his face went red with rage. “How?! Their hyperdrive was damaged!”

“Evidently,” Dooku said, “they either repaired it or had a backup engine.” Turning to consult another sensor scope, he added, “Our tracking device was still on the pirate ship before it escaped. When they exit hyperspace, we’ll pick up their trail.”

“We’re not going anywhere,” Krempil fumed, “until I contact my superiors on Namadii. They’ll be very disappointed when I tell them about how—”

Another chirp sounded from the comm console. The comm officer said, “It’s that unidentified transmission again, sir.”

Krempil said, “Probably just an echo from the pirate ship.”

Dooku looked through the viewport and said, “I don’t believe the McGrrrr Gang is responsible for the transmission, Captain. I surmise it’s coming from the spacecraft seventy meters off our port side.”

“What?” Krempil looked out the viewport and saw a small, teardrop-shaped spacecraft slowly tumbling across space. The spacecraft had a single, elliptical thruster and a curved, narrow, black slit that appeared to be a window. “It looks like an escape pod,” Krempil said. He looked at a data readout on the comm console and added, “Why isn’t that pod showing up on our sensors?”

“It must have some kind of frequency jammer,” the comm officer said.

As Jedi, both Dooku and Ambase were strong with the Force, an energy field that spanned the entire galaxy. The Force empowered them with great strength and speed and enabled them to lift and move objects without any physical contact. They could perceive their surroundings in ways that ordinary life-forms could not and at times even foretell the future. Drawing from the Force, Dooku said, “I sense a life-form in the spacecraft.”

Ryder Windham

"I sense it, too," Ambase said. Then added. "And... it's strong with the Force!"

As the small vessel tumbled past the cruiser, Dooku said, "It's drifting toward the asteroid belt." He turned to the navigator. "Lock a tractor beam onto it."

The navigator consulted a scope as he adjusted the tractor beam controls, then said, "I can't get a lock on anything, sir. The pod is invisible on our sensors, so the tractor won't—"

"Then operate the tractor beam manually," Dooku said impatiently.

"We can't, sir," the navigator said, embarrassed. "The controls are ... well, they're fully automatic."

Dooku looked at Krempil and said, "Ambase and I require your shuttle."

Krempil raised his eyebrows. "You're going after that pod?"

"Precisely."

"But what about the McGrrrr Gang?"

"We'll go after them later," Dooku said as he and Ambase swept off the bridge.

Dooku steered the box-shaped shuttle after the unidentified vessel, which was visible in the distance, still tumbling toward the asteroids. Seated beside Dooku in the shuttle's cockpit, Ambase familiarized himself with the docking-tube controls as he said, "Let's hope the pod's passenger isn't hostile."

"We don't even know whether the vessel *is* a pod," Dooku said. "It could be a spacious ship, built for a small species. We'll find out soon enough. We should reach it in about a minute. Are you ready to lock on?"

"Yes." Keeping his hand near the docking-tube controls, Ambase said, "Captain Krempil didn't seem very happy to let us borrow this shuttle. He was so eager to go after the McGrrrr Gang, I wouldn't be surprised if he decides to leave without us."

"Krempil is a coward and a fool. He won't go anywhere until we're back on board with him." Dooku shook his head. "It's bad

STAR WARS: Guardians of the Chiss Key

enough that the Galactic Senate expects the Jedi Order to server politicians, but that we must also answer to paramilitary organizations is insulting.”

Ambase glanced at Dooku. “Insulting? Do you mean personally?”

“Not at all,” Dooku said as if the thought had never occurred to him. “It’s insulting to our ideals. The Jedi Order should serve the will of the Force, not the whims of corrupt bureaucrats. For all we know, helping the Malarian Alliance capture the McGrrrr Gang might end up more disastrous than what happened on Galidraan.”

Ambase shook his head. “I still can’t believe we lost eleven Jedi in that battle.”

“Jedi weren’t the only losses,” Dooku said. “And all because we believed we were doing the right thing when we went up against those Mandalorians.”

“The circumstances were unfortunate.”

“No, Ring-Sol. The circumstances were avoidable.”

Ambase almost questioned Dooku’s comment but decided against it. He and Dooku had been friends for years, and he was well aware of Dooku’s concerns and opinions about the Galactic Senate. At the moment, he was more intent on preventing the unidentified vessel’s destruction than engaging in a debate.

Dooku expertly guided the shuttle into an orbital path around the teardrop-shaped spacecraft. Testing a switch on the control console in front of him, he said, “The vessel is invisible to the shuttle’s tracking sensors, too. We’ll have to do this the hard way.” He maneuvered the shuttle closer to the vessel.

Ambase eyed the vessel’s exterior and said, “That triangular panel must be the hatch. I don’t see any external controls or locking mechanisms, but we can...” Ambase’s head jerked back as he once more sensed the Force’s power radiating from the spacecraft. “Do you feel that?”

Ryder Windham

“Indeed,” Dooku said. “The mysterious traveler is as strong with the Force as a Jedi. This day is turning out to be full of surprises.”

As the shuttle continued to rotate around the vessel, Ambase deployed the shuttle’s docking tube. The tube was still extending from the shuttle when a dark shape slapped against the cockpit’s window, surprising Ambase and causing him to accidentally hit the wrong control lever. The docking tube struck the vessel harder than intended, sending it faster toward the asteroids.

“Mynock,” Dooku said, identifying the creature with tapered, membranous wings and a large, round mouth that had already suctioned to the outside of the window. Dooku made a sweeping gesture with his fingers as he used the Force to push the energy-eating parasite off the window. The Mynock fell away, leaving an ugly suction mark.

Dooku punched the shuttle’s accelerator and raced after the vessel. Ambase saw a wide asteroid looming directly in the vessel’s path and said, “Hurry!”

Outside the viewport, distant stars appeared to blur as Dooku banked hard to go after the elusive vessel. As they rapidly neared the wide asteroid, Dooku concentrated his Force powers on the pod to draw it closer to the shuttle while Ambase readjusted the docking-tube controls. The docking tube made a loud thunk as it touched the pod’s convex hull.

“We have it!” Ambase said.

Dooku sent the shuttle into a steep dive, taking the now-secured vessel with it. They passed so close to the asteroid that the shuttle’s sensor systems screeched in protest. As they angled away from the asteroid, Dooku said, “Now that we’re attached to the craft, are we getting any readouts?”

Ambase looked at a data display on his console. “The vessel has a pressurized atmosphere that’s almost identical with our own. The passenger breathes as we do.”

“Evidently,” Dooku said as he brought the shuttle to a stop at a safe distance from the asteroids. He activated the comlink,

STAR WARS: Guardians of the Chiss Key

opened a signal to the patrol cruiser, and said, "Dooku to Captain Krempil, Ambase and I will inspect the spacecraft to determine whether the passenger poses any threat. Stand by for my next transmission."

"Yes, Master Dooku," Krempil's sullen voice crackled from the comlink

Ambase followed Dooku out of the cockpit. Dooku opened the hatch to the passage tube, and they stepped into the airlock. After Ambase sealed the hatch behind them, they proceeded through the tube's next hatch until they stood before the triangular panel that they assumed was the attached spacecraft's egress hatch. Dooku held one hand close to his lightsaber. Ambase did the same as he leaned forward to examine the triangular panel and said, "No visible grips or latches."

"Perhaps the passenger doesn't have dexterous limbs." Dooku moved his left hand around the edges of the panel. Unexpectedly, one edge flickered into a length of soft, white light, and then the panel made a hissing sound as it slid back into the hull, leaving a triangular opening.

Dooku and Ambase gazed into the small spacecraft. The padded interior consisted of a curved seat that encircled an elevated floor-mounted orb containing small, shimmering lights. Ambase said, "It certainly resembles an escape pod. That orb might be the navigational controls. But where's the life-form? I can still sense its presence."

Dooku stepped into the pod and crouched down below the central orb. He found a large ovoid container that was wedged between the orb's base and the bottom of the seat. The container was roughly seventy-five centimeters long, and its opaque shell appeared to be made of marbled plastic. Reaching out with the Force, Dooku sensed a heartbeat within the container.

"I've found the passenger," Dooku said. "Give me a hand, Ring-Sol."

Ryder Windham

Ambase moved around Dooku, crawled onto the curved seat, and looked down at the ovoid container. He brushed his fingers over the container, then said, "It's warm."

The Jedi carefully dislodged the container and moved it onto the seat. Before either could ponder how to open the container, two narrow beams of light snaked across its marbled surface, and then the shell opened and unfolded to reveal a sleeping baby, a humanoid male, lying on a thin-cushioned pad with a silver blanket kicked down around his feet. The baby had blue skin and a head topped with flossy, black hair. The baby wriggled, then opened his eyes and looked up at the two Jedi. The baby's eyes were bright red.

"Interesting," Dooku said. "The passenger has dexterous limbs after all. Just very small limbs."

Ambase looked at Dooku and said, "Surely, the Force itself brought the three of us to this place and point in time."

"I wonder," Dooku said, but his tone hinted at doubt.

"How can you be unsure?" Ambase said as he shifted the silver blanket over the baby's legs and small torso. "What are the chances of two Jedi, traveling through an uncharted sector of space, finding a Force-sensitive infant alone in a runaway pod? This is no coincidence, Dooku."

"I never said it was coincidence. I wonder if something other than the Force brought us all here."

"Something else?" Baffled, Ambase said, "What are you implying?"

"Think about it, Ring-Sol. The baby wasn't piloting this pod. Someone put him in here, someone with technology that can't be detected by our sensors. Perhaps that same someone was able to determine that the Malarian cruiser carried two Force users and deliberately sent this Force-sensitive baby to us."

"But how could anyone have known we would arrive in this area? We didn't know ourselves until we followed the McGrrrr Gang here."

STAR WARS: Guardians of the Chiss Key

Dooku gestured to the baby. “We’ve never encountered this species. Their sensors may be more advanced than ours and might have anticipated our course from many light-years away.”

Ambase adjusted the baby’s blanket again and spotted a small, glass cylinder near the baby’s feet. He picked up the cylinder and saw it contained an arrangement of thin, wirelike filaments, then held it out for Dooku’s inspection and said, “This may contain valuable data.”

Looking around the pod’s interior, Dooku said, “This entire pod is valuable. It’s much more than just a spacecraft, it’s an introduction to an alien civilization, possibly a key to unlocking another realm of space.”

“I suppose we’ll find out after we bring the baby and pod back to Coruscant.”

Dooku raised his eyebrows. “Perhaps we should first try to locate the baby’s homeworld and find out why he was placed in this pod. What if his people are searching for him as we speak?”

“And what if they’re not? As you just said, someone may have *sent* the baby to us. And as for finding the baby’s origins and identity, our best course of action is to take him and the pod back to the Jedi Temple.”

Dooku grimaced. “Would you be so determined to bring the baby to the Jedi Temple if he wasn’t Force-sensitive?”

Ambase let out an exasperated sigh. “We can’t very well abandon him in the pod or leave him with the Malarian Alliance, and we can’t spend forever waiting for someone to claim him, either. He’s a *baby*, Dooku. He needs *help*. We need to make sure he’s healthy.”

The baby made a gurgling sound.

“And we need to feed him,” Ambase added. “As for raising him as a Jedi, that’s a decision the Jedi Council will have to make.”

“Then his fate is sealed,” Dooku said ruefully. “He *will* become a Jedi.”

Ryder Windham

Ring-Sol Ambase shook his head. "You confound me, Dooku. You speak as if the baby is condemned."

"Everyone should have the liberty to choose their own path. So long as the Jedi path is paved by the Galactic Senate, we're all condemned."

"You forget we have our honor and traditions."

"I'm not forgetting anything, Ring-Sol. Consider how well our honor and traditions served the Jedi who died on Galidraan." Dooku stepped out of the pod. Ambase followed, carrying the baby.

While another Jedi task force was assigned to help the Malarian Alliance pursue the McGrrrr Gang, Dooku and Ring-Sol Ambase brought the blue-skinned baby boy and his escape pod to the Jedi Temple on the planet Coruscant. At the Jedi Archives, experts analyzed every part of the escape pod as well as the glass cylinder that Ambase had discovered with the boy.

The escape pod's propulsion system was so completely alien that the experts had to admit they could neither operate nor replicate the technology. The glass cylinder was indeed a data-storage device that held information about the boy, but droid cryptographers and translators were mostly mystified by the data. They concluded that the boy's species called themselves the Chiss, but failed to determine the precise coordinates of Chiss space. Their best guess at the boy's name was Nuru Kungurama.

Just as Dooku anticipated, the twelve members of the Jedi Council agreed that Nuru Kungurama should be raised to become a Jedi. They also decided that the Chiss escape pod should be moved to a storage vault in the Jedi Archives.

Not long after this decision, Dooku stunned the Council when he renounced his commission and left the Jedi Order. He returned to his homeworld, Serenno, where he claimed his birthright as the Count of Serenno and gained immediate access to his wealthy family's fortune.

STAR WARS: Guardians of the Chiss Key

For several years, Count Dooku's actions and whereabouts were a mystery. Eventually, he reemerged as a political firebrand and rallied thousands of star systems to join his Separatist movement, which threatened to secede from the Senate's government and divide the Galactic Republic. The civil war that ensued became known as the Clone Wars.

Eleven years after the discovery of the Chiss escape pod at the edge of Wild Space, Dooku, Ring-Sol Ambase, and Nuru Kungurama would meet again during the Clone Wars.

Chapter Two

Nuru Kungurama said, “Is he still breathing?”

“Talk to me, Chatterbox!” said Knuckles. “Say something!”

A burbling noise came from Chatterbox’s mouth, then his head slumped to his left shoulder and he passed out again. Breaker said, “Keep his head and chest elevated.”

Chatterbox, Knuckles, and Breaker were Republic Army clone troopers and members of breakout Squad. They were in one of the docking bays at Bilbringi Depot, a facility on the largest asteroid in the Bilbringi system, along the hyperspace route known as the Namadii Corridor. The only vessel in the docking bay was the wide thirty-meter-long Suwantek Systems TL-1800 light freighter that had delivered the troopers to the depot, where Chatterbox had been shot in the back by a battle droid. Knuckles and Breaker had removed Chatterbox’s armor so they could apply coagulants and flesh-healing bacta patches to his wounded torso. Breaker had set up the intravenous transfusion kit from an emergency med kit, and both he and Knuckles wore matching bandages across the crooks of their left arms from where they had drawn blood for Chatterbox.

The troopers’ commander, the young Jedi Nurú Kungurama, knelt beside Chatterbox. Studying the flow regulator on the transfusion set, Nurú said, “How much blood did you two give?”

STAR WARS: Guardians of the Chiss Key

"A half liter each," Breaker said.

"He'll need more, and soon."

Knuckles looked around. "Where's Sharp?"

"He said he heard something moving in the adjoining docking bay," Nuru said as he pointed to a nearby doorway. "He wanted to make sure it wasn't another battle droid."

Knuckles picked up comlink and said, "Sharp? Do you read me? Chatterbox needs your blood."

A burst of static came from the comlink, and then Sharp's voice replied, "I... I read you. Are you sure it's my turn?"

"Your *turn*?" Knuckles said impatiently. "You haven't given any yet! Get back to the docking bay now!"

Chatterbox groaned in pain. Knuckles set aside the comlink and returned his attention to his wounded ally.

"Hey, kid!" a deep voice roared from the nearby freighter. Breaker and Nuru turned to see Gizz, a giant, orange-skinned humanoid and swoop biker whom Nuru had befriended on the planet Vaced. Poking his large head out through the open hatch above the freighter's boarding ramp, Gizz said, "I found something you gotta see!"

Nuru was about to respond when he saw Sharp, fully clad in white armor, step through a doorway on the far side of the docking bay. Knuckles saw Sharp, too, and said, "Move it. Sharp!"

Nuru watched Sharp take a cautious step forward, Sharp held his blaster rifle so its barrel was aimed at the floor in front of him, but Nuru noticed he had one finger on his rifle's trigger.

"What's wrong with you?" Knuckles said. "Get over here!"

Nuru sensed something was indeed wrong with Sharp, something... *dangerous*? Ever since Sharp had told Nuru that he suspected a saboteur might be traveling with Breakout Squad, the Jedi had noticed that Sharp seemed anxious and mistrustful. Rising from Chatterbox's side, Nuru positioned himself between Sharp and the other troopers. Two lightsabers were clipped to

Ryder Windham

Nuru's belt, and he held his hand ready to draw and activate one if Sharp opened fire.

Sharp removed his finger from his rifle's trigger, lowered his weapon, and moved one hand to touch the armor that covered his stomach. "I don't feel well. I think I'm... I'm sick."

"Sick?" Knuckles said. "What in blazes do you—?"

"Listen," Breaker interrupted as he looked to the docking bay's wide entrance. "Here comes the cruiser!"

While the other members of Breakout Squad watched the one-hundred-and-fifteen-meter-long *Consular*-class Republic Cruiser ease its heavily armored nose into the docking bay, Nuru Kungurama kept his red eyes fixed on Sharp. The danger that Nuru thought he had sensed from Sharp seemed to have completely vanished. A moment later, the cruiser's landing jets fired, kicking up dust across the deck.

"Hey, kid!" Gizz repeated. "You really gotta see what I—"

"Not now, Gizz," Nuru said. "We're busy out here."

Gizz grumbled as he ducked back into the freighter. As the cruiser settled onto the deck, Knuckles said, "Commander, should we say anything about Aristocra and Ring-Sol Ambase?"

Nuru's mind reeled. Less than an hour earlier, he and Breakout Squad had had a very unexpected meeting with Aristocra Sev'eere'nuruodo, also known as Veeren, the Chiss ambassador he had met previously on a mission to Chiss space. Veeren kid used a tracking device to follow Nuru to Bilbringi Depot and had told him she believed an unknown enemy was conspiring to conquer the galaxy. She claimed the conspiracy dated back at least eleven years and possibly coincided with the Jedi discovering the Chiss escape pod that carried Nuru as an infant. She had forbidden Nuru from telling the Jedi Council about her suspicions because she also believed spies and assassins could be anywhere, and that Nuru's life as well as her own were in danger. Unfortunately, as Veeren was leaving Bilbringi Depot in her starship, another ship, a Kuat *Corona*-class

STAR WARS: Guardians of the Chiss Key

transport, arrived. Veeren's ship fired lasers at the *Corona*, and the *Corona* returned fire. Veeren's ship exploded.

Like all Jedi, Nuru had been trained to live remain calm when he used the power of the Force, but he had felt almost overwhelmed by the grief and rage that struck him when he saw Veeren's ship destroyed. And through the Force, he'd sensed that the *Corona* was helmed by his own Jedi Master, Ring-Sol Ambase.

Nuru's only evidence of his meeting with Veeren was the Chiss tracking device, a small, gray cylinder with a magnetic strip on the side that he'd since secured to his belt. As he removed the device from his belt and tucked it into a pocket, he looked at Breaker. "Say nothing about Veeren or Ambase."

"But, Commander, maybe you *should* tell the Jedi Council about Aristocra. I mean, if everything she said is true—"

"Then we have every reason *not* to tell the Council. Not a word about what happened, and that's an order."

"Yes, sir," Breaker replied, but Nuru could tell that Breaker questioned the order.

The members of Breakout Squad were not the only ones aware of the Republic Cruiser's arrival at Bilbringi Depot. Nearly twenty-one kilometers away from the asteroidal station, the silver-haired Jedi Master Ring-Sol Ambase sat in a needle-nosed, ridged-back Kuat *Corona*-class transport. The transport rested in the shadows of a cluster of asteroids, and Ambase had switched off all the transport's electronic systems and sensors to prevent other vessels from detecting the transport's location. He peered through a pair of macrobinoculars that he'd found in a supply box and searched for signs of any other Republic vessels.

Ambase's companion in the *Corona* was a clone trooper named Sharp, who, like Ambase, was unaware of the fact that another trooper, also named Sharp, was in the company of Breakout Squad.

Sharp was trying to repair the transport's communications systems, which had been damaged when he and Ambase fled

Ryder Windham

Count Dooku's castle during an aerial bombardment. Looking away from a tangle of wires, Sharp said, "General, I don't think it's safe for you to remain in the Bilbringi system."

"I want to know what Nuru is up to," Ambase said. "And if we leave now, the Republic Cruiser's sensors will spot us."

"But there may be more Jedi on that cruiser. If what Dooku said is true, then—"

"Then the Sith Lords are manipulating the Jedi and the Senate, and also turning apprentices against their own Masters. But that's according to Dooku, and I'm not convinced he was telling the truth. For all we know, Dooku is a Sith Lord."

"But, General, he wasn't lying about Nuru Kungurama seizing Bilbringi Depot. And when that strange spacecraft fired at us from the depot, your Padawan did nothing to stop it."

"So it seems," Ambase said as he lowered the macrobinoculars. "But that spacecraft was similar in design to the escape pod that was carrying Nuru when Dooku and I discovered the boy. I wonder if the spacecraft was another Chiss vessel."

"Would that he bad?"

"Perhaps. The Jedi know little about the Chiss. Nuru's escape pod contained data and technology we could barely understand." Ambase glanced at Sharp and said, "Speaking of technology, are you sure you can get the comm to work again?"

"I think so. I'm more concerned about the rest of the transport. We took quite a beating when we escaped Dooku's castle." Recalling how they'd seen the wreckage of Dooku's solar sailer before they'd fled in the *Corona*, Sharp said, "I wish we could have confirmed whether Dooku is still alive."

"Add that to a number of things I'd like to confirm," Ambase said. He looked through the macrobinoculars and returned his attention to Bilbringi Depot.

The Republic cruiser's hatch hissed open and the Jedi Master Kit Fisto stepped down to the docking bay floor. An amphibious

STAR WARS: Guardians of the Chiss Key

Nautolan, Kit Fisto had green skin and long tentacles that extended from his head and dangled down his back. Like many other Jedi Masters, he had become a general in the Republic Army, which had been created to fight the Separatists and their legions of battle droids.

A platoon of clone troopers followed Kit Fisto down the cruiser's hoarding ramp, followed by a team of clone medics. Two medics guided a repulsorlift stretcher into the docking bay,

"Hurry up with that stretcher!" Knuckles shouted.

The medics ran over to Knuckles and Breaker, who remained hunkered down beside Chatterbox. "He was shot in the back," Breaker said. "We gave him two units of blood."

Knuckles looked at Sharp, who was walking slowly toward him. Sharp still had one hand placed against the lower half of his chest plate. Knuckles said, "If you're feeling sick, you should let the medics look at you."

Sharp shook his head. "Let them take care of Chatterbox first. I'll be all right."

Nuru watched the medics move Chatterbox onto the stretcher. One medic adjusted the stretcher's elevation controls, raising it to hover a full meter above the ground while another medic picked up Chatterbox's helmet. As the medics brought Chatterbox to the cruiser and the just-arrived platoon fanned out across the docking bay, Nuru turned to see Kit Fisto approaching from the cruiser.

Kit Fisto came to a stop before Nuru. Nuru kept his expression calm as he bowed. "Greetings, Master Fisto."

Fisto bowed in return. "Master Yoda told me where to find you. I came as soon as I could. You're a long way from home, young one. But from what I've heard, you've also been very busy."

Nuru wondered how much Fisto knew about his actions over the past few weeks. His red eyes flicked to the Republic cruiser. "I'm concerned about Chatterbox... the wounded trooper."

"The medics will do everything they can," Kit Fisto said.

Ryder Windham

“Of course,” Nuru said solemnly. “Did Master Yoda relay my report about what happened on Vaced?”

“He said your mission did not go as planned, but that you came to Bilbringi Depot and managed to capture Overseer Umbrag. He said you would give me details.”

Nuru had almost forgotten about the Skakoan Overseer Umbrag of the Techno Union, who was allied with the Separatists. Nuru shook his head. “Forgive me, Master. I’m not sure where to begin.”

“I’m aware that you left The Jedi Temple to follow Ring-Sol Ambase to Kynachi, and how you led a group of clone troopers to liberate Kynachi from Overseer Umbrag’s Separatist occupation. I also know that Ambase went missing on Kynachi and that Master Yoda reluctantly authorized you to command your improvised unit, Breakout Squad, on two covert missions.” Fisto looked at the three clone troopers who stood at attention nearby and added, “Breakout Squad?”

Nuru said. “Master Fisto, meet Breaker, Knuckles, and Sharp.”

Fisto nodded at the troopers. “I commend you for your actions at Kynachi.”

Breaker said, “Thank you. General.”

Fisto looked at Nuru. “What happened on Vaced, and what brought you to Bilbringi?”

Choosing his words carefully, Nuru replied, “Breakout Squad and I were returning to Coruscant in a freighter owned by Lalo Gunn, a pilot we met on Kynachi, when we received a transmission from Master Yoda and Chancellor Palpatine. They instructed us to change course for Vaced so we could rendezvous with Commissioner Langu Sommiolor, a representative from Kynachi, and escort him to Coruscant for a special meeting with the Senate. The chancellor said Republic Intelligence had reason to believe the Techno Union might try to stop the commissioner from reaching Coruscant. We took precautions, but just after the

STAR WARS: Guardians of the Chiss Key

commissioner's freighter landed, an assassin killed Sommilor and his two pilots. The assassin wore Mandalorian armor.

"But the Mandalorians ended their warrior ways years ago," Fisto said. "Theirs is a peaceful world. Perhaps the assassin was an imposter?"

"All I know is he was an expert sniper and martial artist. He might have killed me if a swoop biker named Gizz hadn't joined the fight. Lalo Gunn blasted the assassin's ship out of the sky over Vaced."

"You're certain the assassin is dead?"

"We saw his ship explode. He couldn't have survived. However, Cleaver found—"

"Who is Cleaver?"

"Forgive me, Master. Cleaver is a droid commando that we refurbished with parts from Lalo Gunn's former droid copilot. Cleaver is very loyal and works with us. On Vaced, he found a utility belt. We suspected the assassin either dropped the belt or deliberately left it behind. One of the belt's pouches held an imagecaster and the only thing on it was a map of the Bilbringi system. I wanted to investigate, and we left Vaced in Commissioner Sommilor's ship." Nuru pointed to the thirty-meter-long Suwantek Systems freighter.

The clone troopers of Breakout Squad noticed that Nuru had not mentioned the fact that the utility belt Cleaver had found belonged to Ring-Sol Ambase. Apparently, Kit Fisto was not curious about the belt or its origin, for he looked at the Suwantek freighter and said, "You're no longer travelling with Lalo Gunn?"

"Her ship was destroyed during the fight with the assassin," Nuru said. "She decided to part ways with us on Vaced, which surprised me."

"Why?"

"Because she seemed fond of Chatterbox."

Fisto looked at Nuru and said, "Fond?"

"Yes. Very fond."

Ryder Windham

“Oh.” Looking back at the Suwantek freighter, Fisto said, “You brought the bodies of Sommilor and the pilots with you?”

“Yes, Master. I anticipated someone would send the bodies back to Kynachi.”

“Before you left Vaced, why didn’t you send a transmission to Coruscant to alert the Jedi Temple about what had happened or where you were going?”

“We learned there was a tracking device on Lalo Gunn’s ship. I didn’t know whether the assassin, or someone else planted the device, but I allowed the possibility that someone was still monitoring Breakout Squad’s movements and communications. I chose not to send any transmission that might have been intercepted by an enemy.”

“That’s practical of you. So you arrived here and found Overseer Umbrag?”

Nuru nodded. “His yacht and six drone barges are in the adjoining docking bay. It seems Umbrag and a small number of battle droids had seized the depot, but they weren’t prepared for us.”

“According to my data, Bilbringi Depot is owned by a Hutt named Drixo. Any sign of Drixo or her servants?”

“No, Master.”

“Did you inspect the drone barges?”

“Yes. We only checked to make sure there weren’t any droids on board, but the barges appear to be filled to capacity with construction materials and building supplies.”

“Do you know what Umbrag was planning on building?”

“No, Master,”

“Where is Umbrag now?”

Nuru pointed to the Suwantek freighter again. “Gizz and Cleaver are guarding him.”

“Gizz?” Fisto said with surprise. “The swoop biker you mentioned? He came here, too?”

“If we’d left him on Vaced, his circumstances might have become... unfortunately complicated. I felt obligated to help

STAR WARS: Guardians of the Chiss Key

him. Anyway, after we captured Umbrag, I sent a transmission to the Jedi Council. But then one last remaining battle droid took us by surprise and shot Chatterbox.” Nuru looked at Breaker and said, “I believe that’s all there is to tell.”

“Not quite,” Fisto said. “I see you’re carrying your Master’s lightsaber as well as your own. How did you come by that?”

Nuru brushed his fingers against the two lightsabers at his belt. “On Kynachi, we met a bounty hunter who claimed he found Master Ambase’s lightsaber. He gave it to me. I... I’d hoped to return it to my Master.”

Fisto placed a hand on Nuru’s shoulder. “You, too, are to be commended for your actions, young one. But now, it’s time for you to return to Coruscant while my team secures this facility and—”

Fisto was distracted by the sudden noise of his entire platoon switching off the safety controls on their blaster rifles. Nuru saw that Fisto’s platoon had trained their weapons at the Suwantek freighter’s hatch, where a skeletal droid with glowing eyes had just emerged.

“Hold fire and lower your weapons!” Nuru said as Breaker and Knuckles jumped in front of the nearest members of Fisto’s platoon, blocking them from firing at Cleaver. “The droid commando is completely reprogrammed and won’t hurt you. He’s with Breakout Squad.”

The troopers looked to Kit Fisto. Fisto nodded once, and the troopers lowered their rifles. Knuckles said, “That was a close one. Cleaver. We’ll have to be more careful with you around troopers in the future.”

“That would be a relief to all,” Cleaver said as he stepped down the freighter’s hoarding ramp.

Nuru glanced at Fisto and whispered, “Cleaver hopes to become a Jedi.”

Fisto grinned. “Well, doesn’t everyone?”

Cleaver came to a stop before the two Jedi. Nuru said, “Cleaver, allow me to introduce you to Jedi General Fisto.”

Ryder Windham

Cleaver bowed and said, "It is my honor, General." He Turned to Nuru. "Commander Kungurama, you should know that Gizz discovered three men hidden in the freighter."

"Something must be wrong with your memory, Cleaver. Before we left Vaced, you helped bag and move the bodies of Commissioner Sommilor and his two pilots into a storage compartment. Don't you remember?"

"But I'm not talking about the dead men, Commander. Gizz found three men who are *alive*. They were in a different storage compartment."

"Are they... stowaways?"

"Not precisely. They were bound and gagged. It appears they were captives."

Fisto looked at Nuru and said, "You do travel with unusual company."

"What's most odd," Cleaver continued, "is that they claim to be Commissioner Sommilor and the pilots from Kynachi."

Nuru's red eyes went wide with surprise. Fisto said, "I'd like to have a word with these men."

"So would I," Nuru said as he headed for the freighter.

Chapter Three

Breaker, Knuckles, Sharp, and Cleaver followed Nuru Kungurama and Kit Fisto into the freighter. They found Gizz in the main cabin, his back hunched so he wouldn't hit his broad head against the ceiling as he handed mugs filled with water to three men who were seated on an acceleration bench. One man wore a blue uniform, and the other two wore green tunics that were adorned with triangular orange insignias, identifying them as KynachTech pilots. All three had gold hair that was a typical characteristic of people from Kynachi. Looking at Nuru, Gizz said, "What took you so long?"

"Gizz, meet General Fisto."

"Another Jedi, huh?" Gizz said as he raised his thick fingers of his right hand in a casual salute.

Fisto bowed slightly to Gizz, and Nuru noticed Fisto's nostrils close in a reflexive response to Gizz's body odor. Stepping back from Gizz, Fisto faced the three seated men and said, "Are you all right?"

The men nodded. Gizz said, "They're still a little groggy. I think they were knocked out by something."

Knuckles leaned close to Breaker and whispered, "It's a wonder they're not knocked out by the smell of Gizz."

Ryder Windham

Gizz's tapered ears twitched, and he growled, "I heard that, Knucklehead."

The man in the blue uniform took a long drink of water, cleared his throat, and said, "I'm Commissioner Sommilor from Kynachi." Gesturing to the two men seated with him, he added, "My pilots, Pikkson and Sunmantle." He shifted his gaze to the young, blue-skinned Jedi and said, "You... you're Nuru Kungurama. I saw you on Kynachi. The people of my world are in your debt for saving us from the Techno Union."

Neither Fisto nor Nuru sensed that the man was lying, but they also knew they needed more information before they could decide whether he was trustworthy. Removing a small scanner device from his utility belt, Fisto said, "May we transmit a data scan to the Kynachi authorities to confirm your identity?"

"Of course."

Fisto aimed the scanner at the seated men, then plugged the device into the main hold's comm console. "It will take a few minutes to get a response from Kynachi."

Fating the man who claimed to be Sommilor, Nuru said, "Do you recall Chancellor Palpatine introducing us via a hypercomm conference, directing me to meet you on Vaced and escort you to Coruscant?"

"Vaced?" The man shook his head. "No. No, that couldn't have been me. You and the chancellor must have been talking with the imposter."

"Imposter."

The man in the blue uniform nodded. Gesturing to the pilots beside him, he said, "We were on Kynachi, preparing to leave for Coruscant. I was to meet with Republic Senators about an alliance. The people of Kynachi want to join your fight against the Separatists." He took another sip of water. "We were still on the launch pad when three men attacked us. They put on masks, disguised themselves to look like us. They made us swallow doze tablets before they put us in binders and locked us in the aft hold."

STAR WARS: Guardians of the Chiss Key

Nuru turned to Breaker and whispered, "Inspect the three bodies that we brought from Vaced. See if they're wearing disguises."

As Breaker exited the main hold, Fisto faced the man in the blue uniform and said, "Did you recognize the men who captured you?"

"No. They were strangers, not from Kynachi. Maybe they were mercenaries. Did... did you apprehend them?"

"Before I answer that, can you tell me whether you have any enemies? Anyone who might have hired mercenaries to abduct and impersonate you?"

The man thought for a moment, then said, "The only person I can think of is Overseer Umbrag. He must be furious about how the Republic troopers drove his forces off Kynachi. Or ... of course! The Techno Union must have wanted to stop me from reaching Coruscant!"

Gizz aimed a thick thumb at a sealed hatch and said, "We got Umbrag locked up tight in there. He could tell us."

Nuru said, "But what if he refuses to talk?"

"Then I'll make him talk." Before anyone could intervene, Gizz opened the hatch and squeezed his bulk into the next chamber. Inside, he found Umbrag sitting on a bench, huddled against a metal bulkhead. The Skakoan was wearing thick-lensed goggles and a protective armored pressure suit. The only parts of his body that was exposed and unprotected were the nip and back of his green-skinned head. Metal gauntlets covered his wrists, which were secured by binder cuffs. A second set of binders was clamped around his ankles.

Umbrag looked up at Gizz and said meekly, "If I am a prisoner of war, I have certain rights!"

"Shut up, ugly," Gizz said as he sealed the hatch behind him.

From the other side of the hatch, Umbrag and Gizz heard Nuru's muffled voice shout, "Gizz, what are you doing?"

Ignoring Nuru, Gizz stared hard at Umbrag and said, "See this?" He held up his massive right hand and made a fist that was

Ryder Windham

almost as large as Umbrag's head. "This here hand of mine is what I call the lie detector. You lie to me, and the hand gets angry. Then the hand starts pounding whatever's within reach, and there's absolutely nothing I can do to stop it. Nothing personal, Umbrag, that's just how it works. Understand?"

Umbrag let out a horrified squeaking sound as he nodded.

"Good. What I wanna know is... do you know a guy named Sommilor from Kynachi?"

Umbrag looked surprised. "Sommilor? I... I think he was a local politician of some kind."

Gizz flexed the fingers of his right hand, making the knuckles pop loudly before making a fist again. "Did you try to stop him from going to Coruscant?"

"You mean... during the occupation of Kynachi?"

"I mean," Gizz said through clenched teeth as he leaned closer to Umbrag, "did you hire goons to stop him from going to Coruscant?"

"No!" Umbrag shrieked. "No! I don't know what you're talking about!"

Gizz bared his sharp teeth and snarled, "You're lying."

"No!" Umbrag repeated as he raised his manacled wrists to protect his head, "I swear I didn't hire anyone to stop Sommilor!"

Gizz grinned. "Okay," he said as he turned, opened the hatch, and squeezed through it to rejoin Nuru and the others. As he sealed the hatch, he looked at Nuru and Fisto and said, "Umbrag doesn't know nothin'."

"Thank you for your assistance, Mister Gizz," Fisto said, "but the Jedi prefer less violent methods of interrogation."

Gizz shrugged, and his shoulders made a thudding noise as they struck the ceiling. "Suit yourselves."

Breaker returned to the main hold. "It's true about the disguises. Commander," he said. "The dead men are wearing synthskin masks and gold wigs."

STAR WARS: Guardians of the Chiss Key

The man in the blue uniform raised his eyebrows and said, “Dead men?”

Gizz said, “Synthskin?”

A loud beep sounded from the comm console. Kit Fisto removed his scanner, studied its tiny datascreen, then said, “KynachTech has confirmed your identity, Commissioner Sommilor. Nuru, tell the commissioner and pilots what happened on the planet Vaced.”

Nuru said, “The men who impersonated you were killed by a sniper. The sniper tried to kill us, too, but he died when his ship exploded. We don’t know whether he was operating alone or following orders.”

Sommilor shuddered, then said, “But... was the sniper trying to kill me and my pilots, or did he know he was shooting at imposters? And if the imposters were trying to stop me from reaching Coruscant, why didn’t they just kill me on Kynachi? Why the charade?”

“Those are very good questions,” Fisto said. “If we can identify the imposters, we might find an answer.”

Gizz said, “I wanna take a look at those dead guys.” He ambled across the main hold and ducked through the hatch that led to the compartment that contained the bodies.

Fisto looked at Knuckles and said, “Go with him. Make sure he doesn’t tamper with any evidence.” As Knuckles followed Gizz out of the main hold, Fisto turned back to face Sommilor and said, “For all we know, you may still be targeted for assassination. Do you wish to proceed to Coruscant, or would you rather return to Kynachi? Either way, you shall have a military escort.”

Before Sommilor could answer, the pilot named Pikkson gasped as Gizz walked back into the main hold with a dead man slung over his shoulder. The corpse was the man who had impersonated Sommilor. Gizz was followed by Knuckles, who caught Fisto’s glare and said, “I’m sorry, General. He just grabbed the body. I couldn’t stop him?”

Ryder Windham

Fisto said, “Mister Gizz, what’s the meaning of this—?”

“No need for mister. Just call me Gizz,” Gizz said as he lowered the corpse onto a table near the seated men. “I should’ve thought of this when Breaker mentioned the synthskin masks, but it was all that babble about who knows what or doesn’t know whatever that really got me thinking. Only one gang I ever heard of does everything that sneaky and confusing.”

Nuru said, “Gizz, you’re not making any sense. What gang?”

Gizz pushed up the sleeve on the dead man’s right arm to reveal a smooth area of flesh. “See there? That’s synthskin, right?”

“It appears to be,” Fisto said as he moved closer to the corpse.

“Let’s see what it’s covering.” Gizz pinched the smooth flesh and yanked it away, revealing a black, circular tattoo on the man’s forearm. The tattoo had an outer ring of pointed spines.

Kit Fisto’s eyes widened at the sight of the tattoo. “Black Sun.”

“Yep,” Gizz said. “I guessed right.” He looked at Nuru. “I don’t even want to try to imagine what these guys had planned for you, kid. If you ask me, the sniper did us all a favor.” He tossed the synthskin over his shoulder, and it hit Sharp’s armor with a wet, slapping sound.

“I... I think I’m going to be ill,” Sharp said.

“Go see the medics, Sharp,” Nuru said. “You can check on Chatterbox for us while you’re at it.”

As Sharp shuffled out of the freighter, Knuckles muttered, “Sharp’s really not himself lately.”

Sommilor said, “General Fisto, can you tell me... what is Black Sun?”

“A criminal organization. Very secretive, and very powerful.”

“Do you think the Separatists hired Black Sun to kidnap me?”

Fisto shook his head slightly, making his tentacles jiggle. “I’m not sure what to think. If the Separatists hired Black Sun, then who hired the sniper? And was the sniper really a Mandalorian or

STAR WARS: Guardians of the Chiss Key

just a rogue in Mandalorian armor? All we know for certain is that we're dealing with deadly adversaries. So tell us, Commissioner... how do *you* want to proceed?"

Sommilor looked at Pikkson and Sunmantle, then said, "This experience has been most distressing, but it has also made me even *more* resolved to secure an alliance with the Republic. I don't know why the Separatists took such extraordinary measures to prevent me from reaching my meeting with the Senate, but they *must* be behind all this skulduggery, and I won't allow them to scare me off. I wish to proceed to Coruscant."

Fisto bowed. "As you wish. But first, I must secure Bilbringi Depot."

Knuckles said, "Excuse me, General, but... even though Chancellor Palpatine and General Yoda were unaware that they were dealing with impostors from Kynachi, they *did* entrust Nuru Kungurama and Breakout Squad to escort the commissioner to his meeting. Unless anyone objects, I for one would like to finish that assignment."

Fisto looked from Nuru to Sommilor and said, "Any objections?"

Nuru said, "Commissioner Sommilor, I was unprepared for what happened on Vaced. I will understand if you would prefer to travel with a senior Jedi."

Sommilor smiled. "I don't think anyone could have been prepared for what happened on Vaced. But without you and Breakout Squad, the Techno Union might still be occupying my world. I would be honored if you escorted me to Coruscant."

Fisto smiled. "So be it. And Breakout Squad can also deliver Overseer Umbrag to the Republic authorities for further questioning."

Nuru said, "Master Fisto, do you know whether reports of Commissioner Sommilor's death have reached the Galactic Senate?"

"I'm not certain, but news does travel far these days."

Ryder Windham

“Then I request that you don’t notify anyone that the Commissioner and his men are still alive, that we allow others to believe they died on Vaced. That way, we have a better chance of delivering them safely to the Senate because, well... assassins don’t try to kill dead men,”

“A wise move.” Fisto began to turn away, then he stopped and said, “Oh! I forgot to tell you earlier, Nuru ... when you arrive at Coruscant, you should contact the Jedi scholar Harro Kelpura in the Jedi Archives. He wants to talk with you about the escape pod in which Master Ambase found you. He said he’d deciphered some significant data.”

Wondering if the data were related to his heritage, Nuru said, “Did he mention what type of data?”

Fisto shook his tentacled head. “You’ll have to ask Kelpura.”

The trooper that Breakout Squad thought was Sharp wore his helmet as he left the Suwantek freighter. He did not go straight to the clone medics who were with Chatterbox in the Republic cruiser. Instead, he walked across the docking bay, passing members of Kit Fisto’s platoon, and went through a hatch that led to a shadowy corridor where he knew he would have at least a few minutes of privacy.

The holocomm unit that he removed from his utility belt appeared to be a standard military issue device, but it had been modified for long-range encrypted transmissions across space. As he held the holocomm in one hand and tapped the small data keys with his thumb, he used his other hand to remove his helmet, revealing the strong features of a clone soldier.

He glanced up and down the corridor to make sure no one was approaching and then exhaled. The color of his flesh shifted to a grayish green. He blinked his eyes, and they changed from brown to yellow, from human to reptilian — revealing his true form as a shape-shifting Clawdite.

The holocomm projected a flickering light that transformed into a hologram, a three-dimensional image of a woman’s head.

STAR WARS: Guardians of the Chiss Key

She was bald with ghastly white skin and pale blue eyes. The Clawdite had no difficulty recognizing the assassin Asajj Ventress.

Ventress said, "You should have reported to me hours ago."

"I don't have much time," said the Clawdite. "Things went wrong on Vaced. Lalo Gunn's ship crashed. A Mandalorian assassin and Black Sun were involved."

"What?!"

"Now I'm with Breakout Squad at Bilbringi Depot."

Bilbringi?! Ventress suddenly recalled her recent meeting with the Duros bounty hunter on the moon Bogg 5. The bounty hunter had delivered two stasis pods that contained the unconscious forms of the Jedi Ring-Sol Ambase and a single clone trooper.

Dooku had instructed her to send the Duros bounty hunter to Bilbringi, and she knew Breakout Squad's arrival to Bilbringi could not be a coincidence. She said, "Why did you go to Bilbringi?"

"We've... I mean *they've* captured Overseer Umbrag," the Clawdite said breathlessly. "A Republic cruiser just arrived with a platoon of troopers, and..." Glancing back up the corridor to make sure he was still alone, he continued, "You have to get me out of here. Breakout Squad almost made me give blood for a wounded clone. I pretended I was sick, but they must be getting suspicious. It's only a matter of time before—"

"Enough!" Ventress snapped. "Stay with Breakout Squad. I will contact you in one hour with new orders."

"New orders? But... but I've already done everything you asked!"

"And you'll *keep doing* what I tell you, shape-shifter, or our deal is off."

"Wait! I don't even know where I'll be in one hour! You can't expect me to—"

The hologram flickered and died. The Clawdite stared at the empty air for a moment, then returned the holocomm to his belt

Ryder Windham

and put his helmet back on. As he walked back to the docking bay and headed for the Republic cruiser, he tried to control his breathing and remain calm.

The clone troopers who were stationed outside the cruiser did not take any special notice of the armored Clawdite as he approached. The Clawdite said, "I'm Sharp, with Breakout Squad. I'd like to check in with the medics to see how my friend Chatterbox is doing. Permission to come aboard?"

"Permission granted, and we hope your brother pulls through."

"Thanks." The Clawdite stepped up into the cruiser and moved down a narrow corridor until he reached the infirmary, where a trooper directed him to a trauma room. The Clawdite looked through a window to see a team of clone medics and a multilimbed medical assistant droid operating on Chatterbox, who was lying on a med pad. A transparent breath mask covered Chatterbox's nose and mouth, and his eyes were closed.

One of the medics noticed the trooper standing on the other side of the window. The medic stepped out of the room, gave a quick study of the trooper's armor then extended his right hand and said, "I'm Quills. You're with Breakout Squad?"

The Clawdite shook the medic's hand. "Sharp."

"Glad to know you, Sharp. No need to wear your helmet in here,"

The Clawdite winced as he rapidly adjusted his facial muscles and pigmentation to transform his features. When he removed his helmet, his head was almost identical to the medic's. He gestured to the window and said, "How's my friend?"

"We've got him stabilized. Chatterbox is a tough one, he is. If I were a betting man, I'd wager he'll live. I'd like to get him into a recovery facility on Coruscant as soon as possible. When we get back, we'll put him in our best place."

"Well, I... I'd better go tell my squad." The Clawdite turned and went to the infirmary's exit, taking his helmet with him, and returned to the docking bay floor.

STAR WARS: Guardians of the Chiss Key

“Hey, Sharp!” Breaker called out.

The Clawdite jumped slightly as he turned to see Breaker and Nuru Kungurama approaching. Nuru said, “You saw the medics?”

The Clawdite nodded. “Chatterbox is stabilized, but he’s unconscious. A medic named Quills said he’ll live, but... he doesn’t look good.”

Breaker lifted his gaze to the docking bay’s ceiling. Then he closed his eyes, lowered his head, and muttered, “This awful war.”

“We’ll hope for the best,” Nuru said. “How are you feeling. Sharp?”

“I’m fine. Commander,” the Clawdite said. “I don’t know why I got queasy earlier, but it passed.”

“You look pale.”

“I’m fine. Really fine.”

“Good,” Nuru said. “We have new orders. We’re taking Commissioner Sommilor, his pilots, and Overseer Umbrag in the Suwantek freighter to Coruscant while General Fisto’s team finishes securing the depot.”

The Clawdite said, “I hope General Fisto won’t take long. Quills said Chatterbox should go to a medical facility on Coruscant as soon as possible.”

Breaker said, “Well if Chatterbox is stabilized, maybe Quills could return with us?”

Nuru said, “I’ll check with Quills and General Fisto. I’m sure we all want what’s best for Chatterbox.”

“Indeed, sir,” said the Clawdite.

Quills helped Breaker and Cleaver transfer Chatterbox and the necessary medical equipment from the Republic cruiser to the Suwantek freighter and placed Chatterbox in the freighter’s passenger quarters. Quills also confirmed that the Kynachi pilots Pikkson and Sunmantle were fit for duty. While the pilots went to the cockpit and Breakout Squad prepared for liftoff, Gizz stayed posted outside the chamber that held Overseer Umbrag.

Ryder Windham

Minutes later, when the freighter lifted off and moved out of the docking bay, it carried one young Jedi, two active clone troopers, one unconscious clone trooper, one clone medic, one reprogrammed droid commando, one malodorous humanoid giant, one diplomat, two pilots from Kynachi, one Skakoan prisoner, three dead men who bore Black Sun tattoos, and one increasingly anxious Clawdite shape-shifter disguised as a clone trooper.

But by the time the freighter reached Coruscant, the men with the Black Sun tattoos would not be the only dead passengers.

Chapter Four

Still hiding in the asteroid belt in the Bilbringi system, Ring-Sol Ambase and the actual clone trooper named Sharp sat inside the *Corona*-class transport and watched the departing Suwantek freighter's thrusters grow bright. Ambase leaned forward in his seat as the freighter transformed into a streak of light that almost immediately vanished in the distance.

Ambase slumped back from the cockpit's window. "Nuru Kungurama was on that freighter."

Sharp cocked his head and said, "Judging from the trajectory of their jump, they're taking the Namadii Corridor, the course that leads to Palanhi."

"And Coruscant."

Sharp looked at Ambase and said, "Do you want to wait for the Republic cruiser to leave the depot before we proceed?"

Ambase was still pondering that question when a burst of static sounded unexpectedly from the comm console. Ambase glanced at Sharp and said, "It's working?"

Sharp examined a datascreen and said, "Yes, General. And we're picking up an encrypted holocomm transmission. It's coming from... the Bogden system."

Ryder Windham

Dooku? Ambase leaned over beside Sharp to face the comm console and said, “The Republic cruiser won’t detect the transmission?”

“No, sir. They’ll only read static.”

“Then let’s see it.”

Sharp pressed a control button, and a hologram of Dooku materialized over the console. Dooku said, “Ring-Sol! Are you all right?”

Ambase considered whether to respond, then said, “I’m doing better.”

“When I realized you and the trooper were missing during the attack on my retreat, I feared the worst. But then I learned a freighter had left my landing pad, and I’ve been trying to locate you ever since. I’m relieved to know you survived.”

Sharp muttered, “I’ll bet he is.”

Ambase discreetly raised one finger to signal Sharp to remain silent. Keeping his eyes on Dooku’s hologram, he said, “We didn’t know what happened to you, either. How did you find us?”

“There’s a tracking device on the freighter,” Dooku said. “After all, the ship was my property. Now, I must say, I didn’t expect you’d travel to the Bilbringi system. Did you go there just to find out whether I was telling the truth about Nuru Kungurama taking over the depot?”

“Why else?” Ambase said tersely.

“What did you learn?”

Ambase stared hard at the hologram.

“I see,” Dooku said. “You found out I was right. I’m sorry your Padawan has taken the dark path. But it’s best that you know the truth, that you’re prepared, especially after the news from Coruscant.”

Ambase stiffened. “What news?”

“A Jedi scholar, Harro Kelpura, has been studying an unusual spacecraft and claims he has successfully deciphered extensive

STAR WARS: Guardians of the Chiss Key

data about the civilization that produced the craft. Most of the data is related to the military offensive and defensive systems.”

“And you’re relaying this information because...?”

“Because the spacecraft is the escape pod that we found in the Unknown Regions eleven years ago.”

Looking skeptical, Ambase said, “You expect me to believe you have classified information from the Jedi Archives?”

Dooku shook his head. “No, Ring-Sol. I don’t expect you to believe anything I say. If finding Nuru Kungurama on Bilbringi didn’t convince you of my sincerity, nothing I say ever will. However, you might be interested in the fact that Harro Kelpura has moved the escape pod from the Archives to an abandoned manufacturing facility at Coruscant’s Dacho District for testing purposes. Furthermore, I’ve learned that someone intends to steal the pod.”

Ambase knew the Jedi scholar Harro Kelpura well and struggled to maintain an impassive expression as he eyed Dooku’s hologram. He said, “I won’t bother questioning whether you’re telling the truth. But I do question your motives for telling me anything at all.”

“Why?”

“Because if anyone were scheming to steal an alien vessel containing data that might be used against enemies, my first suspect would be the leader of the Confederacy. Hence, I wonder why you’d warn any Jedi in advance.”

Dooku sighed. “I didn’t notify just any Jedi, old friend. I contacted you.”

Surprised, Ambase said, “You mean... you *don’t* want the pod for the Confederacy?”

“Of course not.”

“Then what *do* you want?”

“When you and I discovered the Chiss escape pod, I said that it might be used as a key to another realm of space. While some might try to use such a key in good faith and with noble ambitions, the fact is that some alien civilizations are not eager to

Ryder Windham

meet outsiders. Sometimes, a key can unlock the unexpected, and afterward, it's too late to lock things up again."

"You believe the Chiss are a threat?"

"Ring-Sol, the key itself is a threat. We know practically nothing about the Chiss. Therefore, we must allow the possibility that their military strength is greater than the Republic and the Confederacy combined. Can you imagine how using the escape pod's data might cause a confrontation with the Chiss? A confrontation that not only escalates war across the galaxy, but far beyond the Outer Rim? I can imagine that possibility, and I won't have that blood on my hands. It would be best for all if the pod were sent straight into Coruscant's sun."

Ambase shook his head. "I still don't know why you're telling *me* all this."

"Because you and I found the pod and brought it to Coruscant. Although we were only briefly its guardians, we remain responsible for our actions. Now, the key to Chiss space is about to fall into the hands of an opportunist. We can't let that happen."

"Do you know who's planning to steal it?"

"Yes," Dooku said. "Nuru Kungurama."

"Nuru?!"

"A reliable informant told me Nuru has already established contact with the Chiss, that he recently met with a Chiss ambassador at Bilbringi Depot, I wouldn't be surprised if he has formed an alliance with the Chiss, an alliance that will serve the Sith Lords."

Ambase thought of the rage he had sensed from Nuru when the unidentified starship exploded as it was leaving Bilbringi Depot and wondered again if the ship had been a Chiss vessel. He looked at Sharp and could tell from the clone trooper's grim expression that he didn't trust Dooku.

Sharp said, "It's your call, General."

STAR WARS: Guardians of the Chiss Key

Ambase returned his gaze to Dooku's hologram and said quickly, "The abandoned facility where Harro Kelpura moved the escape pod... where is it?"

Hearing the urgency in the Jedi's voice, Dooku had no doubt that Ambase would soon be heading for Coruscant.

Asajj Ventress scowled as she steered her Fanblade starfighter down through the rainy atmosphere of Kohlma, a moon in the Bogden system. She was not looking forward to her meeting with Count Dooku.

She brought her Fanblade down on the landing pad beside Dooku's castle, a dark, spired structure that appeared to grow from the upper run of a high mountain. She could see no evidence of the mock bombardment that had been engineered to encourage Ring-Sol Ambase and the clone trooper named Sharp to leave in a Kuat transport. She climbed out of her starfighter, walked fast toward the castle, and was already drenched when she saw Dooku waiting for her outside the castle's entrance.

A disc-shaped repulsorlift device hovered above Dooku's head and emitted a thin energy shield that prevented the rain from reaching his body. Holding his hands behind his back, Dooku said, "Your report."

"Lalo Gunn's ship crashed on Vaced," Ventress rasped. "The Clawdite went with Breakout Squad to Bilbringi Depot, where they captured Overseer Umbrag. And then a Republic cruiser arrived at Bilbringi with a platoon of clone troopers. I suspect he has gone insane. He was babbling about Mandalorians and Black Sun."

Stepping away from the castle's entrance, Dooku began walking slowly around Ventress. "These developments are most unfortunate. I invested a great deal of time and money into securing Bilbringi Depot so it could be transformed into a shipyard for the Separatist fleet." Stopping beside Ventress, Dooku added, "You know how I deal with failure."

Ryder Windham

Ventress spun to face Dooku and snapped, “But you told me to hire the Clawdite for this assignment and to send the Duros bounty hunter to Bilbringi. If *they* failed to—”

Dooku silenced Ventress with his penetrating gaze. “I’m not interested in excuses. I want results.”

Ventress lowered her head. “I do everything you ask, Master. Everything. But I don’t understand why you involved the Clawdite or the Duros. If you had allowed me to capture Nuru Kungurama on Kynachi, I could have—”

“Did you instruct the Clawdite to remain with Breakout Squad?”

“Yes, Master.”

“Then leave now,” Dooku interrupted. “I will contact you when I have a need for your limited services.”

Without another word, Ventress returned to her starfighter. After her fighter lifted off and vanished into the sky, Dooku walked back into his castle. Leaving his personal rain-deflector hovering near the doorway, he proceeded to his communications room and opened a transmission to the Sith Lord Darth Sidious.

A hologram of Darth Sidious’s hooded visage materialized in the air above Dooku’s comm console. Only the lower half of Sidious’s face was visible as his eyes were lost within the shadows of his cowl. Dooku bowed and said, “My Master.”

Addressing Dooku by his Sith Lord name, Sidious replied, “Lord Tyranus. You spoke with Ring-Sol Ambase?”

“Yes. He is on his way to Coruscant.”

“Excellent. And what of Ventress?”

“She has reported that Breakout Squad captured Overseer Umbrag and seized Bilbringi Depot. When this news reaches the Hutt Cartel, they will no doubt contact the Galactic Senate to dispute the Republic’s takeover of Drixo the Hutt’s property.”

“I shall deal with the Hutts,” Sidious said, his mouth twisting into a sneering smile. “I trust Ventress remains ignorant of our schemes.”

STAR WARS: Guardians of the Chiss Key

“Completely. She has no idea that I arranged for Black Sun to capture and impersonate Commissioner Sommilor and his pilots or that I contracted the Mandalorian Death Watch to assassinate the men from Kynachi. Beyond her anger, I sensed only her confusion. She actually believes I’m disappointed about losing Kynachi and Bilbringi to the Republic.”

Sidious’s lips twitched, and his smile vanished. “Ventress also believes she may become your apprentice. If you only manipulate her to fail, she will rise against you sooner than later. She will disobey your orders and try to make you fail. Do not allow her to become a liability.”

“I will be mindful, my Master.” Dooku replied. “Should we be concerned about Overseer Umbrag?”

“Umbrag has outlived his usefulness. Is the Clawdite spy still traveling with Breakout Squad?”

“Yes.”

“Has Ventress instruct the Clawdite to dispose of Umbrag?”

“It will be done,” Dooku said with a nod. “Ventress mentioned that the Clawdite was ‘babbling’ about Mandalorians and Black Sun. Although we expected Breakout Squad to eventually identify the Black Sun agents, we did not intend not them to identify the Mandalorian sniper on Vaced. Evidently, they did.”

The edges of Sidious’s mouth twisted down. “That is unfortunate. It is too early for the Galactic Senate to learn of the existence of the Mandalorian Death Watch. Steps must be taken to make everyone, including Breakout Squad, believe the sniper was not a Mandalorian.”

“The Death Watch should clean up their own mess. I will contact their leader immediately after I talk with Ventress.”

“Do it,” Sidious said. “No one must suspect our maneuverings. And if anyone ever does, it will be far, far too late for them to do anything to stop us.” Sidious bared his teeth. “Ring-Sol Ambase will soon confront Nuru Kungurama on Coruscant. I can *feel* it. And after they meet, one will be a Jedi no more.”

Ryder Windham

“But which one, my Master?”

Sidious leered. “That would be telling.”

Sidious’s hologram faded out. Wasting no time, Dooku keyed a transmission directly to Ventress’s Fanblade starfighter. A hologram of Ventress’s head appeared before Dooku. Ventress said, “My Master.”

“Contact the Clawdite. Tell him to kill Overseer Umbrag.”

Betraying no surprise at the Dooku’s instruction, Ventress replied, “Yes, my Master.”

Dooku broke the connection with Ventress, then keyed a transmission to a secret location on Concordia, one of the two moons in orbit of the planet Mandalore. Several seconds later, a hologram of a Mandalorian warrior wearing a dark T-visored helmet appeared before Dooku. The helmet was adorned with a trident symbol above the visor and concealed the head of the Death Watch’s leader.

Facing the hologram, Dooku said, “It has come to my attention that Republic troops sighted a Mandalorian warrior on Vaced, despite the fact that I gave your sniper explicit instructions that secrecy was essential.”

The Death Watch leader’s helmet tilted forward as he said, “I am aware of the situation. It has been rectified.”

“Rectified? How?”

“HoloNet News will report about a Corellian bounty hunter’s body being discovered with the remains of a stolen ship that crashed on Vaced. The report will dismiss any question of Mandalorian involvement.”

“And this ‘Corellian bounty hunter’ was really...?”

“An available corpse.”

“Very well,” Dooku said. “But the next time I enlist your sniper, I insist he must exercise greater discretion.”

The Death Watch leader nodded once. Dooku broke the connection, and the hologram flickered off. Dooku was already looking forward to his next conversation with the Mandalorian when he would inform him that the sniper had killed the wrong

STAR WARS: Guardians of the Chiss Key

men and that Commissioner Sommilor and his pilots were still alive.

Remembering what Darth Sidious had said about Ring-Sol Ambase confronting Nuru Kungurama on Coruscant, Dooku smiled. He did not question Sidious's ability to foretell future events. He knew that the inevitable duel between Ambase and Kungurama would be glorious.

It never occurred to Dooku that Darth Sidious might have overlooked any loose ends.

Chapter Five

“This place stinks,” Lalo Gunn said. “How much longer do we have to wait for the guy with the money to show up?”

The Duros bounty hunter Cad Bane took a slow tip from his glass, then replied, “Not long.”

They were seated in the tavern at Vaced Spaceport. Night had fallen, and the tavern was crowded with locals. Most were talking about a swoop gang that had been blown to pieces by an explosion at the edge of the woods near the spaceport earlier that day. From the sporadic cheers and laughter, it sounded as if the swoop gang would not be missed.

Gunn raised her glass to her lips and emptied it. “Well, if you ask me, this transaction would have gone faster if *you’d* brought the credits.”

“But I didn’t ask you.”

Gunn pushed her glass back and forth across the bar’s crackled surface until the noise got the attention of the insectoid bartender, a male Vuvrian who had a broad head with twelve eyes and a pair of antennae that dangled down to his narrow shoulders. The bartender refilled Gunn’s glass without comment. Gunn glanced at Bane and said, “As long as we’re killing time, there’s something I’ve been wondering about. Maybe you could clear it up for me.”

STAR WARS: Guardians of the Chiss Key

Bane tilted his head forward, lowering his hat's wide brim over his red eyes. "What do you want to know?"

"On Kynachi, you hired me to make nice with the Jedi kid and his clone troopers and to stick close to them. They became Breakout Squad, I stuck with them, and then you sent a transmission, saying you'd pay me more to bring them to Vaced."

"Get to the point."

"After you contacted me, I got *another* transmission — you won't believe this — from Chancellor Palpatine and some high-ranking Jedi named Yoda. Imagine my surprise when they said they wanted Breakout Squad to rendezvous with a Kynachi diplomat here on Vaced. At first, I thought, "That's convenient," because I didn't have to come up with an excuse to drop out of hyperspace to arrive in the Vaced system. But then I thought..."

"Yes?" Bane said, keeping his expression neutral.

"Well, you, Palpatine, and a senior Jedi, all wanting me to bring Breakout Squad to the same planet... seems like a mighty big coincidence."

Bane's expression did not change, "Are you implying that I'm working with the Chancellor and the Jedi Council?"

Gunn chuckled. "Don't get me wrong, friend, but I think they like to play with their own toy soldiers. However, you're a crafty one, you are. It wouldn't surprise me in the least if you were toying with *them*."

Gunn's compliment did not have any apparent effect on Bane. He took another sip of his drink.

"So what I was wondering," Gunn continued, "did you know the Kynachi diplomat was traveling to Coruscant? And did you pull strings to make the Chancellor contact my ship so he would tell Breakout Squad to meet the diplomat on Vaced?"

"If I did pull any strings," Bane said, "that would be *my* business."

Gunn tilted her chair back but kept her hands on the bar, where Bane could see them. "Take it easy, friend. I was just asking." Looking away from Bane, she surveyed the other

Ryder Windham

customers. "I'm sure glad I'm not stuck on Kynachi anymore, but I am going to miss my ship. It'll be tough to replace the *Hasty Harpy*."

Bane snickered. "Your ship was a rattletrap. With the money you've earned, you can buy a better rattletrap."

"My ship was running fine before the saboteur tampered with it."

"Saboteur? What saboteur?"

Gunn looked at Bane. During their conversation, she had picked up on a few subtle changes in his facial muscles and also slight vocal inflections that indicated he was keeping information to himself. Although she suspected Bane was a good liar, there was still a chance that he was unaware of any saboteurs on the *Hasty Harpy*. She replied, "All I know is someone planted a tracking device on the *Harpy*, rigged her navicomputer to send us to an uncharted black hole sector, and also activated her hypercomm after I'd switched it off. If I ever find out who was responsible, I'll blast him. Getting away from that black hole was no easy trick."

"Interesting," Bane lifted a gloved hand to stroke his chin. "Your only passengers were the Jedi, the clone troopers, and the droid. Did you suspect any of them?"

"One of the troopers seemed odd, and the droid was an odd one, but... oh, I don't know. No point in dwelling on it. The job is done, and the *Harpy's* gone." She glanced at Bane and saw a small furrow form across his blue forehead. Perhaps he didn't know anything about a saboteur, she thought, but she wasn't about to take any chances.

Bane looked to the doorway and frowned. Gunn followed Bane's gaze and saw a short, amphibious alien, a Patrolian with mottled mauve scales, who carried a small satchel as he stepped through the tavern's entrance. Wide fins extended from either side of his head, and he wore a patch over his left eye. Gunn recognized him immediately.

STAR WARS: Guardians of the Chiss Key

The Patrolian saw Cad Bane and approached the bar. But when the Patrolian saw the woman seated beside Bane, his bulbous right eye widened and his mouth gaped open.

Gunn said, "So, you're the guy with the money, huh? I remember you, too." Turning to Bane, she continued, "Last time we met, he was with the crew of the Black Hole Pirates. Another big coincidence, huh?"

Bane shrugged.

Gunn returned her attention to the Patrolian and said, "I didn't know you two worked together, mister... wait, don't tell me." She reached out and patted the Patrolian's shoulder. "You're the one Captain McGrrrr called Robonino, right?"

Speaking in a wheezing croak, Robonino said, "McGrrrr is no longer my captain."

"You still traveling with Bossk?"

Robonino looked at Bane and said, "She asks a lot of questions."

Bane said, "I've noticed."

"Well, pardon me," Gunn said sourly. "I don't have anything against bounty hunters in general, but I'm making an exception for Bossk. If he's on Vaced, I want to know about it because then I'll want to be leaving that much sooner."

Robonino laughed. "Stop worrying. Bossk is far from here." He handed the satchel to Bane.

Bane opened the satchel and removed a leather pouch that was filled with credit chips. He gave the pouch to Gunn and said, "Feel free to count it. It's all there."

"Why wouldn't it be?" Gunn said as she opened the bag to inspect the money.

"Stay put and have another drink," Bane said. "On me." He placed a small credit chip on the bar. "I'll be right back. I need a word with Robonino."

Bane and Robonino made their way through the crowded tavern and stepped outside into the moonlight. Looking around to make sure no one was listening, Bane said, "First of all, Doxun

Ryder Windham

Feez was supposed to bring the money, not you. What happened to him?”

“Feez joined the McGrrrr Gang and asked me to bring the money to you.”

Bane made a mental note to kill Doxun Feez if he ever saw him again, then said, “Second, when I gave you the coordinates to the Black Hole sector so you could infiltrate the McGrrrr Gang and make sure no harm came to anyone on the *Hasty Harpy*, I told you to bring backup. Why did you bring that fool Bossk?”

“He was... available,” Robonino said meekly. His eye twitched nervously as he recalled that he hadn’t entirely protected the *Hasty Harpy*’s crew, especially after a droid named Cleaver had knocked him out cold. Robonino couldn’t think of any good reason to mention this detail to Bane, so he didn’t.

Bane scowled. “You’re fortunate Bossk didn’t bungle the job, bubble brain. Next time you subcontract, check with me before you—” Bane’s words caught in his throat as he noticed a black metallic speck on Robonino’s left shoulder. Bane leaned closer to see the speck was actually a small transmitter, and he remembered how Lalo Gunn had parted the Patrolian. He raised one finger in front of his mouth, signaling Robonino to stay silent as he used his other hand to pluck the transmitter free. He held the transmitter out for Robonino’s inspection. Knowing that Gunn was probably still listening to them. Bane continued, “Did you hear a noise from behind that tree over there?”

Robonino looked at a dark, scraggy tree that grew nearby and said, “No, I didn’t hear anything—”

Bane gave Robonino a quiet whack on the back of the head, then bent down and placed the transmitter on the ground, Robonino realized Bane was trying to create a diversion and said, “Yes! Yes, I did hear something.”

“You wait here while I check it out,” Bane said, but instead of walking toward the tree, he headed straight back to the tavern’s entrance. He strode fast through the doorway, keeping both

STAR WARS: Guardians of the Chiss Key

hands close to his holstered guns as he moved through the crowd and back to the bar.

Gunn was gone, her seat empty. The credit chip that Bane had left for her to buy another drink was right where he'd left it. He scanned the crowd and saw no one resembling Gunn. He looked back to the bar just in time to see the Vuvrian bartender reaching for the credit chip.

With remarkable speed, Bane's hand darted out, grabbed the bartender's thin wrist, and slammed it against the bar. The bartender yelped and was about to protest that he thought the credit chip was his tip when he lifted several of his eyes to meet the gaze of his attacker. Instead, he stared down the barrel of the large blaster that had appeared in the Duros's other hand.

"The woman who was sitting with me," Bane said. "Where'd she go?"

"I don't know!" the bartender cried. "I thought she left with you!"

Bane could tell the Vuvrian wasn't lying or pretending to be frightened out of his wits. The bounty hunter cursed under his breath as he released the bartender's hand. He snatched up the credit chip, pocketed it, and headed back for the door. Stepping outside, he found Robonino standing beside the transmitter. Bane crushed the Transmitter under his boot, then said, "Did you see her come out?"

Robonino shook his head. "She must have left through the kitchen. She couldn't have gotten far."

Bane assumed Gunn had heard everything about him sending Robonino to the Black Hole sector to monitor Breakout Squad. At least she remained ignorant of the identity of his client, who'd supplied him with the Black Hole's coordinates and information about the McGrrrr Gang. Not even Robonino knew about Bane's client. Bane said, "She doesn't know anything damaging. But when people spy on me, I take it personally. We'll search the—"

Ryder Windham

Bane was interrupted by his chirping holocomm. He removed the holocomm from his belt, glanced at Robonino, and said, "I need to take this call. Stay put and watch for Gunn."

Bane walked away from the tavern and entered a dark alley, where he activated the holocomm. A hologram of a hooded man appeared in the air. The hooded man had previously hired Bane to capture Ring-Sol Ambase on Kynachi.

Darth Sidious rasped, "You are still on Vaced, bounty hunter?"

"I am."

"I have an assignment for you. It requires that you leave Vaced immediately."

Because Bane was more interested in a job that paid money than revenge against Lalo Gunn, he said, "I'm listening."

"The Jedi Ring-Sol Ambase and the clone trooper that you delivered to Bogg 5... they have recovered, and they're on the loose. They are traveling in a Kuat *Corona*-class freighter, on their way to Coruscant as we speak. Ambase is under the impression that he cannot trust his fellow Jedi. I anticipate he will attempt to break into the Jedi Archives."

Bane was surprised to be offered another assignment that involved Ring-Sol Ambase, but he knew that his client's money was good. He said, "You want me to kill Ambase this time?"

"On the contrary," Sidious said. "I want you to help him."

Lalo Gunn knew it would have been a mistake to try running from the Duros bounty hunter, which was why she had taken the precaution of paying the tavern's assistant bartender a generous fee in exchange for concealing her in the tavern's storeroom. Hunkered down behind two large crates filled with nonperishable food, Gunn aimed her blaster at the room's only door.

Although the storeroom's lights were off, she could see a sliver of light along the door's left side. The assistant bartender, a Xexto, was supposed to rap four times on the door after the bounty hunter left, then he would enter the storeroom to show

STAR WARS: Guardians of the Chiss Key

he was alone. If the Xexto thought Gunn was in danger, he would knock only three times as a warning,

If the Xexto tried to double-cross her and sent the bounty hunter into the storeroom, she would do her best to make them both regret it.

Almost thirty minutes passed before Gunn heard four raps against the other side of the door. Her finger tensed slightly against her blaster's trigger as the door slid open to reveal the Xexto's spindly silhouette, illuminated by the light from the hallway behind him. A four-armed alien with a small head that bobbed at the top of a long, thin neck, the Xexto cautiously stepped into the room and was reaching for a switch on the wall when Gunn said, "Don't touch the lights — and hands where I can see them."

The Xexto lifted all four hands. "The Duros is gone," he said, "along with his fishy friend."

Gunn didn't budge from her position as she said, "How long?"

"About ten minutes. They both left in a freighter. I watched them board. Saw the freighter lift off."

"Turn on the lights and step back through the door."

The Xexto chuckled as he lowered his hands and tapped the light switch, then walked back through the doorway to stand in the outer hallway. Gunn lowered her blaster but kept it in her grip as she eased herself out from behind the crates. With her free hand, she tossed a credit chip through the doorway to the Xexto. The Xexto caught the chip with his upper left hand and said, "You keep throwing money at me, and I'll keep helping you. Something else you need?"

"An introduction," Gunn said. "I want to meet your local starship dealer. I'm in a buying mood for a rattletrap."

Chapter Six

Nuru Kungurama stepped through a narrow doorway and entered a wide, dark room. Although Nuru couldn't see a light source and the undecorated walls and high ceiling were without windows, long shadows slithered like serpents across the bare floor. At first, Nuru thought he was the only person in the room, but then he saw a lone robed figure standing against the far wall. The figure was a tall man with silver hair.

A chill traveled up Nuru's spine as he recognized Ring-Sol Ambase.

"You never should have left the Jedi Temple, young one," Ambase said. "You never should have followed me." Ambase appeared to glide slowly away from the wall, moving toward Nuru as if his feet were not in direct contact with the floor.

Nuru took a cautious step backward as he moved his hand toward his belt. His hand stopped short as he felt the intensity of Ambase's gaze kicking onto the second lightsaber that dangled from his belt.

Ambase said, "I see you have something that doesn't belong to you."

A loud rush of wind blasted across the room, and the walls and ceiling vanished, revealing an expansive view of towering buildings and spires that surrounded Nuru's position. Nuru

STAR WARS: Guardians of the Chiss Key

suddenly realized he was not in a room at all, but that he was standing on a skyscraper's roof in an unfamiliar area on the planet Coruscant.

He became aware of other figures on the roof. Two clone troopers and a skeletal droid were fighting. He thought the clones were attacking the droid, but then one clone hit the other while the droid just watched.

While the clones continued their fight, the distant clouds behind Ambase began to churn, generating low rumbles of thunder. Lightning flashed, igniting the mirrored windows of a nearby skyscraper that resembled a raised sword. Ambase moved closer to Nuru, extended one hand forward, and said, "The lightsabers. Give them to me."

Nuru shook his head. "No, M—" He choked back on the word *Master*. The man who stood before him was no longer his Master, no longer a Jedi. To Nuru, he was the man who'd blasted Veeren's ship to pieces. A killer.

"I'm no killer," Ambase said. "And I am your Master."

Nuru didn't know how Ambase was reading his thoughts. He tried to calm his mind, to remember his Jedi training, but he was distracted by the fighting clones and his own simmering emotions.

"I can feel your anger," Ambase said. He held out both hands, exposing his palms. "I am defenseless. It's your move."

Nuru thought again of Veeren, how he had watched helplessly as her ship exploded. He felt a violent urge of power course through his veins. Baring his teeth, he grabbed for his lightsaber.

But his lightsaber was gone, along with his Master's weapon. And as his hand clutched the empty air beside his belt, he saw both lightsabers materialize instantly in Ambase's hands.

Ambase ignited the lightsabers. He crossed the humming blades of energy in front of him, swept them across each other, and the blades made a crackling noise as they scissored toward Nuru's head.

"NO!" Nuru shouted as he opened his eyes.

Ryder Windham

“Are you all right. Commander?” Breaker said.

Nuru was seated beside Breaker, behind the two KynachTech pilots, Pikkson and Sunmantle, in the cockpit of the Suwantek freighter. Through the cockpit’s window, he saw cascade of luminous streaks that indicated the ship was still traveling through hyperspace. The pilots had swiveled their seats to glance back at Nurru, who had one hand placed firmly across the two lightsabers at his belt. Nurru blinked his red eyes as he removed his hand from the weapons. “Sorry,” he said. “I had a bad dream.”

“Oh,” Breaker said. “I didn’t know you ever had bad dreams.”

“I didn’t, either.” Squirming in his seat, Nurru said, “Is everything all right with the ship and passengers?”

“The ship is operating fine, sir,” Sunmantle said.

Breaker said, “Do you want a status report, sir?”

“Yes, please.”

“Commissioner Sommilor is resting in the crew quarters. Chatterbox is still unconscious but stable. Umbrag remains locked up. Cleaver’s guarding him.”

“Good,” Nurru said. “I guess I’m just... anxious.”

The pilots returned their attention to the ship’s controls. Breaker leaned closer to Nurru and whispered, “Commander, you really do look rattled. If you don’t mind my asking... about your dream?”

“I saw Ring-Sol Ambase. He was on Coruscant. He tried to kill me.”

Breaker’s brow furrowed. “When we were on Kynachi, you said the reason you left the Jedi Temple and followed Ambase was because you had a feeling that something might go wrong with his mission. And you were right. Everything went very wrong. Could your dream be like that feeling you had? A prediction of what will happen?”

“I don’t know.” Nurru shook his head. “I’m not certain of very much anymore. Nothing has gone as expected since I left the temple.”

STAR WARS: Guardians of the Chiss Key

Breaker sighed. "I began my life in a vat in Kamino ten years ago, which makes me younger than you, sir. And I'm just a soldier without special powers, and I'll never be as wise as a Jedi. But if there's one thing I can tell you, it's that everything doesn't always go according to plan. You have to be ready to improvise. And while you may feel uncertain about many things, Commander, you can trust that the boys and I would gladly follow you anywhere."

Nuru smiled and said, "Thank you, Breaker." He still felt uneasy about his dream of Ambase. He leaned forward in his seat, tapped Pikkson's shoulder, and said, "When do we exit hyperspace?"

"Twenty minutes, sir."

Breaker said, "I'm sure you'll feel better when you return to the temple."

"You're probably right," Nuru said as he rose from his seat. "Let's check on Chatterbox and the others."

Leaving his helmet on a hook at the back of his seat, Breaker followed Nuru out of the cockpit. Nuru tried to calm his thoughts, but he could not shake the feeling that something bad was about to happen.

Knuckles and Gizz were sitting with the trooper they called Sharp in the main hold of the Suwantek freighter, a short distance from where Cleaver stood outside the hatch of the chamber that held Umbrag. Because Gizz was in desperate need of a shower but refused to take one, Knuckles had suggested that he and Sharp wear their helmets, which had built-in air purifiers. This was a relief to the impersonator because it was physically tiring for the Clawdite to maintain his appearance for prolonged periods.

But even after the Clawdite had relaxed his facial muscles, he was not breathing easily. He was worried about Asajj Ventress and what she might want him to do next.

He had already sabotaged the life pods on the starship that carried Ring-Sol Ambase to Kynachi. On Kynachi Ventress had

Ryder Windham

ambushed Sharp to allow the Clawdite to impersonate Sharp and infiltrate Breakout Squad. The Clawdite then rigged Lalo Gunn ship to go to the Black Hole sector and activated the ship's hypercomm to enable interstellar communication while traveling through hyperspace. He had done all these things because if he hadn't, Ventress would kill him.

When he had last spoken with Ventress, she had told him to contact her in one hour, but that hour had long passed. Traveling through hyperspace without any access to a hypercomm transmitter, he wouldn't be able to talk with her again on his own holocomm until he reached Coruscant. He knew she would be furious. As for what the clones would do to him if they discovered he were a Clawdite, he could only imagine.

"Something wrong, Sharp?" Knuckles said. "You've been awfully quiet."

"I'm worried about Chatterbox," the Clawdite said.

Nuru and Breaker walked into the hold. Breaker said, "We just checked in on Chatterbox and Quills. Chatterbox's condition remains stable." Looking from Knuckles to Sharp, Breaker said, "Why are you wearing your helmets?" But then his nostrils flared and he looked at Gizz, and Breaker added, "Never mind."

Nuru said, "We'll be exiting hyperspace in about ten minutes." He looked at the droid standing on the other side of the hold. "Cleaver, make sure Umbrag hasn't tried to remove his restraints."

Cleaver opened the hatch for the chamber that held Umbrag. The droid stepped into the chamber and said, "Commander! Something's wrong."

Nuru ran into the chamber and found Cleaver kneeling beside Umbrag, who was lying on his side on the deck. From what Nurru could see, the binder cuffs were still firmly in place around Umbrag's wrists and ankles. Umbrag wasn't moving.

Nuru dropped down beside Cleaver and looked at the green flesh at the top and back of Umbrag's head. When he couldn't detect any sign of a pulse, he examined the pressure controls on

STAR WARS: Guardians of the Chiss Key

Umbrag's metal chest plate. Breaker, Knuckles, and Sharp moved to the chamber's hatch in time to hear Nuru ask, "Is his breathing apparatus working?"

"I'm not certain," Cleaver said. "Perhaps he switched it off?"

Gizz moved up behind the troopers outside the chamber and said, "What's going on in there?"

Ignoring Gizz, Nuru glanced back at the hatch so he could face the troopers and said, "Get a med kit and a tool kit, and also get Quills!" The three troopers shoved past Gizz, who stumbled backward. As the troopers ran off in different directions, Nuru was returning his attention to Umbrag when something hard smashed against the side of his head.

Umbrag had been faking unconsciousness and had waited for exactly the right moment to swing both arms at Nuru. As Nuru fell sideways to the deck, Umbrag lifted his own upper body fast, clamped his manacled gauntlets around the young Jedi's head, and rolled away from Cleaver.

Cleaver prepared to launch himself at Umbrag, but when Umbrag's back hit the opposite bulkhead, the Skakoan was holding Nuru like a small shield against his chest, his forearms braced across Nuru's throat. Through his armored suit's vocalizer, Umbrag wheezed mechanically, "One wrong move and I'll break the Jedi's neck!"

Cleaver froze. Nuru's eyes were closed, and his body was limp. From the open hatch, Gizz bellowed, "Let go of the kid, you ugly—!"

Overseer Umbrag twisted his wrists slightly, simultaneously applying pressure to Nuru's neck while firing a bolt of energy from a concealed blaster in his left gauntlet. The bolt smashed into Gizz's upper chest, knocking the giant backward into the main hold.

Cleaver was still poised to attack when he realized Umbrag had twisted his concealed weapon so its barrel was braced against the bottom of Nuru's jaw. Cleaver heard one of the troopers yell

Ryder Windham

outside the chamber. Umbrag kept his own eyes fixed on the droid as he said, "I'll kill the boy unless you do as I say!"

Cleaver said, "Nuru Kungurama isn't the only Jedi on board."
"What?!"

Cleaver had been hoping to distract Umbrag, and when he heard the surprise in Umbrag's voice, he knew his bluff had worked.

The droid automatically calculated the movements of the troopers outside the hatch and simultaneously calculated how he would leap across the chamber, grab Umbrag's gauntlets, and rescue Nuru. But just as Cleaver sprang toward Umbrag, he heard a second round of blaster fire tear into the chamber.

The shot came from the hatch. Cleaver was still traveling through the air when he saw the fired energy bolt race toward Umbrag and hit the only unprotected area of the Skakoan's armored body. A millisecond after the impact, Cleaver grabbed Umbrag's gauntlets and pulled them toward his own metal body to prevent the gauntlet blaster from harming anyone else. The droid twisted in midair so his feet landed on the deck as he yanked the gauntlets free.

Umbrag had been killed instantly. Cleaver checked to make sure Nuru was still breathing, then turned his metal head to gaze at the open hatch. He saw Sharp standing above Gizz's fallen body in the doorway. Sharp's feet were braced between Gizz's sprawled legs, and he held his blaster rifle so it was still aimed at Umbrag's head. Behind Sharp, Knuckles and Breaker held their own rifles.

Still facing Sharp, Cleaver said, "You moved faster than I calculated."

The Clawdite stammered, "Is the commander all right?"

Gizz groaned loudly from the deck. As Knuckles knelt beside Gizz, Breaker leaped past Sharp and into the chamber. Dropping beside Nuru and pulling him away from Umbrag, Breaker cupped the back of Nuru's head and said, "Can you hear me, sir?" He lowered his ear over the boy's mouth, then said, "He's

STAR WARS: Guardians of the Chiss Key

out cold, but breathing fine.” As he scooped up Nuru and carried him out through the hatch, he said, “No one touches Umbrag. Seal the chamber.”

Cleaver followed Breaker out of the chamber and sealed the hatch. Knuckles said, “Gizz! You still with us?”

“Yeah,” Gizz muttered as he shifted his bulk against the deck. “Takes more than one blaster bolt to kill me dead. But I think I could use a med kit. How’s Umbrag?”

“He won’t be needing a med kit.”

Gizz grinned. “This day just keeps getting better.”

While Knuckles opened a med kit and began cleaning Gizz’s wound, Cleaver stared hard at Sharp and said, “I calculated I could rescue the commander without any loss of life. How did you move so fast?”

The Clawdite said, “I don’t know. I just... moved.”

Knuckles said, “Let’s just be glad Nuru’s all right, that Umbrag didn’t hurt him. I can’t believe how Umbrag took us all by surprise.”

Cleaver said, “Perhaps if I’d moved faster...”

“Maybe you should have Breaker check your circuits,” Knuckles said.

Cleaver shook his head sadly. “Maybe I’m just not cut out to be a Jedi.”

Nuru was dimly aware of the sound of the Suwantek freighter’s sublight engines kicking in when he opened his eyes to see Breaker and Quills standing above him.

From the way they were looming over him, he could tell he was lying on an elevated bunk in the crew’s quarters. Quills was studying a small medical scanner that he held a few centimeters away from Nuru’s head.

Nuru said, “What... where are we?”

“Easy, Commander,” Quills said. “You were unconscious for several minutes.”

“We’ve left hyperspace?”

Ryder Windham

"Yes, sir," Breaker said.

Nuru took a deep breath. "How close are we to Coruscant?"

"We just reached orbit."

Nuru squeezed his eyes closed. He opened them again. "Did Umbrag hit me?"

"He did, sir. Just before he locked you in a stranglehold."

"Oh," Nuru said, rubbing his neck. "I guess I didn't stop him."

Breaker scowled. "The boys and I did a lousy job of watching your back, sir. It's my fault. I should have inspected Umbrag's armor more carefully when we put the binders on him. He had a blaster built into one of his gauntlets. After he knocked you out, he shot Gizz, and—"

"Gizz?"

"He's all right, sir."

Quills nodded in agreement. "I slapped a bacta patch on the big fellow. He'll be fine, but I should go check on him and Chatterbox."

Thinking fast, Nuru said, "Tell the pilots to take us directly to the Galactic Senate building. We need to deliver the commissioner there before we bring Chatterbox for treatment at the Jedi Temple."

"Aye, sir," Quills said. He exited the crew's quarters.

Nuru looked at Breaker and said, "Why did Umbrag wait until we'd almost reached Coruscant before he attacked?"

"I wondered the same thing. Maybe he just panicked. If he had a reason, he took it with him."

"What do you mean?"

"Umbrag had his gauntlet blaster up against your neck, sir. Sharp shot him. He's dead."

"Oh." Nuru felt slightly ill as he pushed himself up so he rested on his elbows. "That's unfortunate."

"He could have killed you. Sharp saved your life."

"I'm grateful for that, but I'm also sure the Jedi Council and Galactic Senate would have preferred Umbrag still alive so he

STAR WARS: Guardians of the Chiss Key

could have been interrogated.” Nuru checked his belt to make sure Ring-Sol Ambase’s lightsaber was still secured beside his own. “Where’s Umbrag’s body?”

“Sealed in the chamber where he attacked you,”

Nuru grimaced. “I need to see it. After we deliver Commissioner Sommilor to the Senate, I expect I’ll have to make a full report to the Jedi Council.”

Breaker followed Nuru out of the crew’s quarters, and they headed for the main hold. “Commander, if what Aristocra said about spies and assassins being everywhere is true, how can we be sure you’ll be safe anywhere on Coruscant?”

Nuru sighed. “We’ll just have to stay alert and take our chances.”

“That’s not exactly what I’d call a plan.”

“No, it’s not. But as you said, everything doesn’t always go according to plan.”

Breaker shook his head. “I wish you hadn’t reminded me.”

The Suwantek freighter was still descending through Coruscant’s atmosphere, heading for the Galactic Senate building, when a Kuat *Corona*-class transport dropped out of hyperspace in the Coruscant system.

Because thousands of other ships were always arriving at or departing from the heavily populated planet at any given time, no one took any special notice of the *Corona*.

Inside the *Corona* the clone trooper named Sharp turned to Ring-Sol Ambase and said, “Do you want to go straight to the Dacho District, General?”

Ambase nodded.

Sharp reached for the flight controls but hesitated. “If I may ask, sir... how do you know Dooku isn’t leading us into a trap?”

“I *don’t* know,” Ambase said. “But he could have killed us easily before we left his palace, and he didn’t. So take us down, Sharp, and use stealth. We must not alert other Jedi to our presence.”

Ryder Windham

Sharp punched the *Corona's* thrusters and moved into the shadow of a passenger carrier that was heading in the general direction of the Dacho District.

While the *Corona* approached a sprawl of industrial skyscrapers that made up the Coruscant's Dacho District, a battered-looking Telgorn dropship exited hyperspace and angled toward the night side of Coruscant.

The dropship's name was the *Sleight of Hand*, and despite her appearance, she carried heavily modified weapons and defensive systems. Her owner was Cad Bane.

Bane sat in the cockpit alongside Robonino. Robonino said, "You're certain your client hired you to *help* a Jedi?"

"If I weren't certain," Bane drawled, "we wouldn't have left Vaced in such a hurry." He tapped at a keypad, entering data that had been transmitted by his client. A scope displayed a graphic readout of an industrial sector on Coruscant, then a green blip appeared, along with a string of numbers. The blip represented a starship, and the numbers were the ship's identification code. Bane said, "Got him."

Robonino's fins bent back against the side of his head. "Got who?"

"The Jedi, Ring-Sol Ambase. He's traveling in a Kuat transport over the Dacho District. Looks like he's going to land at Moxonnic Manufacturing, or rather what's left of the place." Bane steered the dropship down through Coruscant's night sky as he plotted a course for the abandoned facility. "It will be interesting to see him again."

Robonino's eyeball rolled with surprise. "You've met this Jedi before?"

"He wasn't concious at the time," Bane Said. "That's why seeing him again will be interesting."

Chapter Seven

The Galactic Senate building was an immense, elevated, dome-shaped structure, which rested on a cylindrical foundation in the heart of Coruscant's densely populated government district. After Nuru Kungurama directed the Kynachi pilots to land the Suwantek freighter inside one of the building's many hangars, he went to the main hold where Commissioner Sommilor stood waiting with Breaker, Knuckles, Gizz, and Cleaver. Nuru said, "Gizz and Cleaver, you'll remain on board while we bring the commissioner to the Senate Rotunda."

"Yes, Commander," Cleaver said.

Gizz said, "How come I gotta stay on board?"

Nuru was afraid Gizz might deliberately or accidentally cause trouble in the Senate building, but he didn't want Gizz to know that. Thinking fast, he said, "Because I need you to make sure that the Kynachi pilots don't leave without us."

"Okay," Gizz said as he cracked his knuckles. "But don't take too long. I'm getting hungry again."

Nuru faced Breaker and Knuckles and said, "Where's Sharp?"

"In the 'fresher," Knuckles said. "He said he began feeling sick again during our descent."

Breaker said, "I'll make sure Sharp gets a thorough examination when we return to the Jedi Temple."

Ryder Windham

“Fine,” Nuru said. “Sharp can remain on board. Now then, Commissioner, are you ready?”

Sommilor beamed proudly. “Indeed I am.”

Disguised as Sharp, the Clawdite shape-shifter peeked outside the hatch of the refresher station inside the Suwantek freighter. After confirming that no one was standing outside the ‘fresher, the Clawdite shut the hatch and relaxed his facial muscles to revert to his natural state then activated his holocomm unit to contact Asajj Ventress.

Several seconds passed before Ventress’s angry face materialized as a hologram in front of the Clawdite. Ventress said, “You’re late.”

“I couldn’t help it! We left Bilbringi and jumped to hyperspace and—”

“Where are you?”

“Coruscant.”

“Listen carefully,” Ventress said. “Umbrag is important to the Separatists. You will help him escape and bring him to me.”

The Clawdite gasped. “Help him?! But he’s—”

“Do it!” Ventress broke the connection, and her hologram vanished.

The Clawdite stared at his holocomm unit. His lower lip trembled as he muttered, “I’m dead.”

Nuru led Sommilor, Breaker, and Knuckles out of the freighter and down the landing ramp. As they walked toward a lift tube that would take them to the rotunda where the Senate meetings were held, Nuru was surprised to see Supreme Chancellor Palpatine, his guards, and a tall alien Jedi stepping away from a sleek shuttle. The Jedi was a male Anx, a large reptilian alien with a high, tapered head and long, pointed chin.

Palpatine saw Nuru, too. “Nuru Kungurama? At last, we meet in person.” Then Palpatine looked to Sommilor and smiled as he said, “Ah, Commissioner Sommilor. Welcome to Coruscant,”

STAR WARS: Guardians of the Chiss Key

Sommilor bowed. "Thank you. Chancellor."

"This is an amazing coincidence," Palpatine said. He gestured to the Anx Jedi and said, "Nuru Kungurama, I assume you're acquainted with the Jedi scholar Harro Kelpura? Master Kelpura was just telling me about his research."

"We've never met," Kelpura said in a low, rumbling voice as he bowed to Nuru. "I was distressed when I learned you left Coruscant, young one. I am glad you returned safely."

Nuru bowed in return. He had forgotten that Kit Fisto mentioned Kelpura to him on Bilbringi. "Master Fisto told me you've been studying the escape pod that—"

"Oh, but you must *see* it to appreciate what I've learned," Kelpura said. "I had to move the pod to my new research laboratory away from the Temple as a safety precaution, but there's really nothing to worry about. Except perhaps the discovery of a lifetime!"

Palpatine looked at Nuru and said, "I urge you to go with Master Kelpura. My guards and I will personally escort Commissioner Sommilor to the Senate meeting."

Sommilor thanked Nuru again before he walked off with Palpatine and the guards. Nuru turned to Kelpura and said, "I do want to see the escape pod, but we must return to the Jedi Temple first." He pointed to the Suwantek freighter. "I have an injured trooper who needs medical treatment."

"Then let's be on our way!" Kelpura said as he trotted toward the freighter.

Ring-Sol Ambase and the clone named Sharp sat inside the *Corona* transport, which they'd landed on a rooftop platform on a skyscraper in the Dacho District. Except for several airspeeders that moved across the sky in the distance, there were few signs of life in any direction, but this was not unusual. Several hundred years earlier, an immense industrial chemical accident had killed more than three hundred thousand beings in the area, and most of the buildings, factories, and warehouses in the Dacho District

Ryder Windham

had been deserted ever since. The district was commonly referred to as the Dead Sector.

Sharp looked around at the surrounding rooftops. One nearby skyscraper had a sharply angled top that made the entire building resemble a raised sword and loomed over an old air-taxi hub. Sharp said, "Where's Dooku?"

The *Corona's* holocomm chirped. Ambase pressed a button and a hologram of Count Dooku appeared. Ambase looked at the hologram and said, "Decided not to join us?"

"Traveling to Coruscant has proved more difficult for me than I anticipated," Dooku said. "I ran into some Weequay pirates. But I have not abandoned you, old friend. Stay where you are. Help is on the way, and I'll be there, too, as soon as I can."

"Help?" Ambase said. "What do you mean?"

Dooku's hologram began rapidly flickering, "Something's jamming... signal and my... can't hear—" The hologram vanished.

Ambase and Sharp climbed out of the *Corona* and onto the rooftop platform. Ambase looked up and saw a small, battered ship descending toward them. Sharp saw the ship, too, and said. "Recognize it?"

"A Telgorn dropship."

The dropship landed on the roof about twenty meters from *Corona*. Ambase and Sharp watched as a Duros and a Patrolian climbed out of the dropship. The Duros wore a broad-brimmed hat and a long coat, and his belt held a pair of blasters. He carried a satchel in one hand and had what appeared to be weapon-laden gauntlets wrapped around both forearms. The Patrolian's left eye was covered by a patch, and a padded backpack was slung across his small back.

Sharp whispered, "Bounty hunters?"

"Looks like it," Ambase said.

STAR WARS: Guardians of the Chiss Key

Walking slowly across the roof, Cad Bane and Robonino approached the Jedi and the clone trooper. Bane said, "Ring-Sol Ambase."

Surprised, Ambase said, "I don't believe we've met."

Bane grinned. "I'm working for a client who prefers to remain anonymous. He told me to meet you here." Bane aimed a thumb at Robonino and added, "My associate and I are to assist you."

Ambase said, "Did your client tell you how you might assist me?"

"You're looking to obtain an exotic escape pod that's in this building. My associate and I have access codes and equipment to get you past the building's security systems. You'll need us to help you get the pod out of the building and onto your ship." Bane put down the satchel he'd been carrying, then kicked it so it skidded a short distance across the rooftop before it came to a stop in front of Ambase. Bane said, "Inside the bag, you'll find a pair of Republic Navy officers' uniforms. Put them on. The uniforms will allow you and the clone to get past the guards who are stationed inside."

Ambase said, "I have some experience with infiltrating buildings. In case your client didn't tell you, I'm a Jedi."

Bane smiled. "I don't hold that against you. But from what I've heard, even a Jedi can use help, especially if he's lost his lightsaber."

Sharp glared at the Duros as he moved in from of Ambase and said, "How do you know General Ambase isn't carrying a lightsaber?"

Keeping his eyes on Ambase, Bane said, "Because I happened to be on Kynachi during the liberation, and it's my understanding that another Jedi took your weapon. I heard the Jedi was a blue-skinned boy. Know him?"

Ambase sensed the Duros was dangerous but did not sense he was lying. He looked at Sharp, then looked back at the Duros. "We're wasting time," he said as he picked up the satchel. "We'll change clothes inside, and then you'll take us to the escape pod."

Ryder Windham

Bane grinned. He knew from experience that it was usually best not to tell an outright lie to a Jedi. The reason he was certain that Nuru Kungurama left Kynachi with Ambase's weapon was because Bane had been the one who'd handed it to him.

The Suwantek freighter climbed away from the Galactic Senate building. Inside the freighter's main hold, Nuru Kungurama was introducing Harro Kelpura to Gizz and Cleaver when an alarm chirped from a small box-shaped datapad on Kelpura's belt.

"What's this?" Kelpura plucked the device from his belt and flipped it open to display a datascreen. "Must be some kind of technical error." He adjusted the image on the screen, and his large eyes went wide with surprise. Turning his tapered head to face Nuru, he said, "We must change course for the Dacho District this instant."

Nuru said, "Master Kelpura, I know you're eager to show me the escape pod, but—"

"Change course *now*," Kelpura said. He held out the datapad so Nuru could look at its screen. "Two ships have landed without authorization on my lab building's roof, and the alarm system has been disabled. Someone must be trying to steal the pod!"

Examining the datascreen, Nuru saw that one of the ships was a *Corona*-class transport.

Ambase.

Nuru grabbed the datapad and shoved it into a socket. He pressed a button and said, "Kungurama to the bridge. Get a lock on the location of this building in the Dacho District and take us there now."

The pilots obeyed. As the freighter dropped out of its flight path to the temple and angled off toward the Dacho District, Cleaver said, "But, Commander Kungurama... shouldn't we take Chatterbox to a medical—?"

STAR WARS: Guardians of the Chiss Key

“We’ll get him to the temple as soon as we can,” Nuru interrupted. “Master Kelpura, I have reason to believe my Master, Ring-Sol Ambase, is already at your laboratory.”

“Really?” Kelpura said. “That’s good news!”

“No, it isn’t,” Nuru said, “because I don’t think Ambase is on our side anymore.”

No alarms sounded within the building that had been converted to Kelpura’s research laboratory. Walking ahead of Bane, Ambase, and Sharp, Robonino made quick work of unlocking doors and deactivating sensors as they moved deeper into the building.

Both Ambase and Sharp were wearing the dark gray uniforms and black leather boots of Republic Navy officers. Ambase’s uniform had a rank badge that identified him as an admiral. Sharp’s badge identified him as a commander.

They soon arrived at a makeshift checkpoint where four human guards were stationed outside a large, locked door. Seeing a Republic admiral approach, the guards snapped to attention, opened the door, and allowed the group to pass. If the guards thought it odd that a Republic officer and clone trooper were accompanied by a menacing-looking Duros and Patrolian, they didn’t see fit to mention it.

The door closed behind Ambase’s group. Robonino immediately reached into his backpack, pulled out a magna lock, and slapped it across the door so it would be impossible to open from the other side. Bane said, “No way for the guards to follow us now.”

Sharp said, “I’m guessing we won’t be leaving the way we came.”

“You guess right,” Bane said. They proceeded through another corridor. Bane pointed to a connecting corridor and said, “We turn left here, and we should arrive at the entrance of the room where the pod’s kept.” But when they turned left, they arrived upon the unexpected.

Ryder Windham

“Sentry droids?” Robonino muttered as he observed the three weapon-laden automatons that stood before a large, metal door. He glanced at Bane with his one good eye. “Your client say anything about them?”

“No,” Bane said. “They must be new. Just keep walking toward them so they don’t suspect anything.”

Seeing the four figures approach, one droid stepped away from the others and said, “Halt.”

Bane’s right hand made a casual dip to his holster. He brought the blaster pistol up fast and shot the droid twice through the head. The two remaining droids made rapid clicking sounds as they lurched forward and trained their own weapons at Bane, but Bane’s left hand had already yanked his other blaster out. He squeezed the triggers of both blasters at the same time, and he fired again. The droids’ heads exploded simultaneously, and all three droids collapsed to the floor like broken puppets.

“So much for doing things quietly,” Bane said. He looked at Robonino, tilted his head toward the metal door, and said, “Open it.”

Robonino reached into his backpack again and pulled out two small thermal detonators with magnetic edges. While Bane motioned Ambase and Sharp to follow him back into the adjoining corridor, Robonino planted the two detonators on the metal door, then walked quickly to catch up with the others.

The explosion was very loud.

The dust was still settling as Bane and Robonino returned to the door, or rather what was left of it. Ambase and Sharp followed the bounty hunters and saw a gaping, shredded rupture in the middle of the door. Bane led the way through the rupture.

The laboratory had a high ceiling that was laced with metal pipes and exhaust fans. Narrow windows lined the upper walls. At the center of the lab, a cluster of computers and sensor-laden equipment surrounded a wide platform. On the platform rested a small teardrop-shaped spacecraft.

STAR WARS: Guardians of the Chiss Key

Ambase felt his throat go dry at the sight of the Chiss escape pod. He hadn't seen it in over a decade, but it looked exactly as he'd remembered. He spotted its most distinguishing feature, the triangular egress hatch that lacked grips or latches, and he remembered how he and Dooku had squeezed into the pod to remove the infant Nuru Kungurama.

Bane looked at Ambase and said, "Something wrong?"

Ambase shook his head. "No."

"Then let's get this done," Bane said. He began tapping at the keypad on the back of one of his gauntlets while Robonino went to the far wall and began planting more explosives.

Ambase looked at Bane and said, "What are you doing?"

"Powering up my ship," Bane said as he stopped tapping his gauntlet. "After my associate blows the wall, the autopilot will bring my ship to us."

Sharp said, "You're going to use a tractor beam to yank the pod out of here?"

"Right again," Bane said. "And then we'll transfer the pod to your transport, and you can take it away."

Ambase said, "Take it away *where?*"

Bane shrugged. "I was only paid to make sure you got the pod. After that, you can take it wherever you want."

By the time the Suwantek freighter had left Coruscant's Senate District and entered the Dacho District, Nuru and Breaker had moved to the seats behind the pilots in the bridge. They had a clear view of the abandoned factories and skyscrapers, and when Nuru saw the gleaming building that resembled a raised sword, he felt his stomach clench. "Breaker, that building... I saw it in my dream."

"The dream you had of Ambase?"

Nuru nodded. The pilots guided the Suwantek toward the laboratory building on which they saw a Corona-class transport and a Telgorn dropship resting on the roof.

"How did the dream end?"

Ryder Windham

“Ambase killed me.”

The Suwantek was still descending toward the laboratory building when a large section of the building’s west wall exploded.

Chapter Eight

The Kynachi pilots, Pikkson and Sunmantle, swung the Suwantek freighter away from the laboratory building to avoid the explosion's spray of fire and smoke. Sunmantle swatted the ship's intercom button and said, "Everyone buckle up and hold tight!"

Nuru leaned forward so his head was beside Pikkson's and said, "Are any life-forms in the ships on the roof?"

Pikkson consulted a sensor and said, "No, sir."

"Then circle back and put us down."

The pilots obeyed, steering the Suwantek through a wide curve around the eastern side of the building. Behind Nuru, Harro Kelpura poked his large head through the bridge's hatch and said, "What happened?"

"Big explosion," Nuru said. "Please return to your seat, Master Kelpura."

Kelpura stumbled away from the hatch. The Suwantek angled up for the rooftop, leveled off, and was about to land when the Telgorn dropship leaped unexpectedly from the roof and smashed into the Suwantek's aft thrusters, knocking the freighter sideways.

The Suwantek's engines whined as the pilots struggled with controls, trying to right the vessel. Breaker threw one arm

Ryder Windham

protectively in front of Nuru as the freighter lost altitude and traveled over a chasm between skyscrapers. Sunmantle said, "We're going down!"

As Nuru sensed the approaching impact, he suddenly thought of Chatterbox, lying unconscious and defenseless in the Suwantek. He regretted that he hadn't delivered the wounded trooper to the Jedi Temple as soon as they'd arrived on Coruscant, and he felt a sense of failure. All he could do was hope that his allies would survive.

And then the Suwantek freighter crashed.

A cold wind rushed in through the large hole that exploded out from the west side of the laboratory building. Inside the remains of the laboratory, Ring-Sol Ambase, Sharp, and Robonino stood near the undamaged Chiss escape pod, while Cad Bane guided his dropship in through the blasted hole. Because of the dropship's powerful deflector shields, the ship was not only undamaged by the collision with the Suwantek freighter, but Bane didn't even realize there'd been a collision.

As the ship touched down on the lab's floor, Bane glanced at Sharp and Robonino and said, "You two, clear a path for the tractor beam."

Sharp and Robonino went to the computers and other equipment that had been set up around the escape pod, and they began shoving aside all the apparatuses that lay between the pod and the dropship.

Ambase stepped closer to the pod, examined the base that it rested on, and then turned to Bane and said, "There's a Jedi energy lock securing the pod to the floor. Only a Force user can unlock it."

"Then do your stuff, Jedi," Bane said before he climbed into the dropship.

Ambase found the energy lock's control panel and placed his right palm against it. A humming sound emanated from the base,

STAR WARS: Guardians of the Chiss Key

followed by a muffled pop. Satisfied that the pod had been freed from its energized mooring, Ambase stepped away from the pod.

Bane activated the dropship's tractor beam and aimed it at the pod. As the beam lifted the pod and drew it closer to the dropship, Robonino gestured to Ambase and Sharp to follow him into the dropship. After they boarded, Bane backed the dropship out through the hole in the lab's wall, taking the pod with it, and ascended to the building's roof.

"Breaker. Breaker! Are you all right?"

Breaker groaned. He and Nuru were still belted into their seats in the Suwantek's bridge. The Suwantek had plowed sideways into a tangle of ventilation pipes that covered the roof of an abandoned building and had come to a stop near the edge of the roof. The bridge's lights were still on, but the ship's engine had died. Breaker had a bloody gash on the side of his jaw.

"Breaker?!"

Breaker opened his eyes. "I hear you, Commander. I'm with you."

"Go check on the others."

While Breaker scrambled out of his seat, Nuru unbuckled his safety belt and peered past Pikkson and Sunmantle so he could see the laboratory building in the distance. He looked just in time to see the Telgorn dropship rising up to the roof along with a small, teardrop-shaped escape pod.

Nuru shouted, "Sunmantle! Pikkson!"

"Yes, sir?" Pikkson said.

"Can you get this ship airborne?"

Pikkson consulted a status readout and said. "We lost one thruster, but I think we can—"

"Do it! Now!"

Pikkson punched the ignition for the repulsorlift engines, and the freighter began to rise from the roof's crushed ventilation pipes. But then the freighter shuddered and Sunmantle said, "Something's snagged our landing gear."

Ryder Windham

"I'll take care of it," Nuru said. He pointed to the lab building. "The moment we're free, make a close pass over that roof so I can jump to it." He turned and bolted out of the bridge and almost ran straight into Breaker.

"Quills and Chatterbox are okay," Breaker said as he followed Nuru to the main hold. "I think Sharp's trapped in the 'fresher."

Entering the main hold, Nuru saw the passengers had taken a pounding. The visor on Knuckles's helmet was cracked. Harro Kelpura was sprawled across the deck. Cleaver's left arm was bent at an odd angle. Gizz had accidentally slammed into a bulkhead and left a large dent.

Knuckles moved beside Harro Kelpura, touched the Anx's neck, and said, "Master Kelpura was knocked out."

Gizz rubbed the back of his head, looked at Nuru, and said, "What in blazes happened, kid?"

"We crashed, and our landing gear is snagged." He popped a hatch, and cold air flooded into the hold. "Gizz and Cleaver, I may need your help!"

Gizz and Cleaver followed Nuru out through the hatch and onto the roof. They moved around the freighter until they found a wide tangle of crushed metal wrapped around two of the landing legs. Nuru handed Ring-Sol Ambase's lightsaber to Cleaver and said, "Use this."

Cleaver took the weapon and activated its blade in the same instant that Nuru ignited his own blade. While the Jedi and the droid sliced through the metal debris, Gizz used his bare hands to pull away the heavier chunks of metal and flung them clear of the freighter.

"We're clear!" Nuru said. He switched off his lightsaber. Cleaver did the same, and then Nuru motioned for Cleaver and Gizz to climb back inside the freighter. He followed them in but kept the hatch open as he braced himself within its frame. The freighter lifted from the roof, moved over the yawning chasms between the skyscrapers, and angled toward the lab building.

STAR WARS: Guardians of the Chiss Key

Cleaver and Gizz noticed Nuru standing in the open hatch. Gizz said, “Are you nuts? Get inside already!”

Nuru ignored Gizz. He was too busy focusing on the lab building and waiting for the right moment to jump. And because everyone in the main hold was watching Nuru, they failed to notice the refresher door open or see the clone trooper they called Sharp as he came staggering out, his helmet askew.

Cad Bane and Robonino had just finished helping Ambase and Sharp load the escape pod onto the *Corona* when Bane heard the loud whine of an approaching engine. He turned and looked up to see the Suwantek freighter, which was listing toward its starboard side and spewing smoke from one thruster.

“Job’s over,” Bane said. He sprinted for his dropship. Robonino chased after him.

Ambase saw the Suwantek, then saw the small figure who was braced inside an open hatch.

Nuru.

Ambase heard a loud burst, saw a bright flare race away from the dropship, and realized the Duros bounty hunter had just fired a missile at the incoming freighter.

Nuru saw the missile streaking toward him. He had no reason to doubt that Ring-Sol Ambase was responsible for the attack, and he knew there wasn’t any chance for the Suwantek to avoid the missile.

The missile glanced off the freighter’s lower hull and detonated, throwing the freighter forward. Nuru lost his grip in the hatch’s frame and fell, unaware that Cleaver and the trooper he knew as Sharp were also launched off their feet inside the main hold. Cleaver tumbled through the hatch after Nuru and was immediately followed by the disguised Clawdite.

Nuru’s Jedi reflexes kicked in as he fell toward the laboratory building’s roof, and he swiftly executed a midair somersault that enabled him to land on his feet. A split-second later, Cleaver, still

Ryder Windham

holding Ring-Sol Ambase's lightsaber, jumped down in front of Nuru. The droid was keenly aware that one of the troopers had followed him out of the hatch, and he sprang forward to catch the falling trooper and absorb his impact. The Suwantek zoomed away from the roof, leaving a smoking trail before it vanished between two skyscrapers.

Nuru saw Cleaver catch the trooper before the two figures rolled across the roof. At the same time, the Telgorn dropship lifted off, rising away rapidly from the rooftop before it tore off across the sky. But the young Jedi was not distracted by the rolling figures or the fleeing dropship. His red eyes were locked on Ambase, who was wearing a Republic Navy admiral's uniform and stood beside the *Corona* with his own gaze fixed on Num.

And then Nuru noticed the uniformed clone officer who stood a short distance from Ambase, near a row of rectangular skylights. Because Nuru had spent so much time in close proximity with a group of clone troopers, he no longer saw the clones as entirely identical, so he was very surprised to see that the clone in Ambase's company so strongly resembled one member of Breakout Squad.

He looks exactly like Sharp.

Across the roof, the Clawdite rolled out of Cleaver's protective embrace and realized his helmet was about to come straight off his head. The Clawdite automatically shifted his facial muscles and coloring so he would resemble the clone trooper he'd been impersonating since he'd left the planet Kynachi. The helmet came off his head, and he watched it bounce away across the rooftop, secure in the knowledge that he now looked exactly like Sharp. He pushed himself up to his feet and looked back at Nuru and Ambase.

Near Ambase, the clone trooper designated CT-4012, who had been named Sharp because of his remarkably sharp vision, saw his mirror image and realized that he was looking at an imposter in his own armor. CT-4012's face went red with anger.

STAR WARS: Guardians of the Chiss Key

Ambase noticed the droid commando who'd landed on the roof. The droid held a familiar-looking lightsaber. The lightsaber was Ambase's own, the one that he had constructed for himself many years earlier.

"I see you have something that doesn't belong to you," Ambase said to the droid. He used the Force to pry the lightsaber from the droid's grip, and the weapon flew toward Ambase.

Ambase's lightsaber was flying when Nuru leaped forward and plucked the weapon in midair. Nuru somersaulted across the roof, and when he came up standing, he had a lightsaber in each hand.

The clone in the Republic Navy officer's uniform pounced on his identical counterpart, and the two began fighting, exchanging kicks and punches. One man grabbed the other, but they both lost their balance. They crashed through a skylight and fell into the building.

As Nuru looked back at Ambase, he thought of his recent dream again and felt a stab of fear. He knew what would happen next. A strong gust of wind swept across the roof. Nuru noticed the clouds churning in the sky behind Ambase. Lightning flashed, brightly illuminating the mirrored windows of a nearby skyscraper that resembled a raised sword. Nuru thought of Veeren's death, and his fear was replaced by fury.

Staring at Nuru, Ambase said, "The lightsabers. Give them to me."

Nuru shook his head. "No, you're a killer."

"I'm no killer," Ambase said. "I'm your Master."

Nuru sensed Cleaver moving to his left and heard someone shout. He couldn't tell whether it came from the Clawdite or the clone who was fighting him.

"I can feel your anger, Nuru," Ambase said. He held out both hands, exposing his palms. "I'm defenseless. It's your move."

Nuru was clutching both lightsabers as tightly as he could, but he was unable to stop Ambase from using the Force to tear the

Ryder Windham

weapons from his hands. The lightsabers landed with loud smacks against Ambase's palms. Ambase ignited both blades.

Nuru did not question that his dream had become a reality, and he expected Ambase was about to attack. But he did not expect Cleaver to leap past him and land in front of Ambase.

Ambase swung his lightsaber at the droid's head. Cleaver ducked and kicked out with one leg, aiming for Ambase's midriff. Ambase dodged the kick and drove the other lightsaber, Nuru's weapon, straight through Cleaver's metal chest. Cleaver's photoreceptors went dark as he fell away from the blade and clattered against the roof.

"No!" Nuru screamed. Using the Force, he yanked his lightsaber out of Ambase's grip. The lightsaber's blade automatically deactivated as it flew toward Nuru. He caught the weapon and ignited its blade.

Still clutching his own weapon, Ambase glanced at the fallen droid commando, then looked at Nuru and said, "Allied with the Separatists, have you?"

Nuru did not feel compelled to explain that Cleaver had been his friend. He bared his teeth as he sprang at Ambase. Their lightsabers met with a loud clash.

Nuru spun and swung his lightsaber low, aiming for Ambase's legs. Ambase blocked the attack and shouted, "What happened to you, Nuru?!"

"What happened to *me*?" Outraged, Nuru swung his lightsaber again and again, but Ambase blocked each strike with ease.

Ambase said, "I know you came here to steal the pod."

Nuru ducked, and Ambase's blade swept over his head. "Then what's it doing in your ship?"

"To stop you from taking it!" Ambase parried another blow.

"You killed an innocent girl at Bilbringi!"

"I didn't—!"

The duel was interrupted by an engine's loud roar. Nuru had almost forgotten about the Suwantek when he saw it rise up suddenly at the far side of the roof. Still spewing smoke from its

STAR WARS: Guardians of the Chiss Key

damaged thruster, the Suwantek edged up over the roof and came down hard, shattering one of its landing legs. A hatch opened, and Knuckles, Breaker, and Gizz jumped out.

Nuru was about to swing his blade again when Ambase raised one hand and used the Force to knock Nuru off his feet, sending him tumbling toward the approaching troopers. Ambase sprinted to the *Corona*.

Nuru rolled to a stop. Breaker arrived beside him and said, “Commander! Are you—?”

Nuru heard the *Corona*’s engines fire. Still holding his lightsaber, he shoved Breaker aside and ran for Ambase’s ship. The *Corona* was just lifting off as Nuru leaped onto its nose. Ambase watched from the cockpit as Nuru drove his lightsaber deep into the hull, and then Nuru swept the blade hard to the side. The *Corona*’s nose exploded, launching Nuru back through the air toward the rooftop.

“I got him!” Gizz shouted a moment before Nuru fell into his arms.

Smoke began to fill the hovering *Corona*’s cockpit as the vessel moved toward the edge of the roof. Ambase coughed at the same moment that the ship began shuddering violently, and his forehead accidentally struck a control console’s metal bracket. He popped the cockpit’s emergency hatch and leaped back to the roof, holding tight to his lightsaber as he landed just ten meters away from Nuru and the giant who held him. Another explosion tore through the *Corona*, and then the entire ship erupted into a ball of fire, sending flaming bits in all directions. The wreckage fell and crashed on a lower roof.

Gizz lowered Nuru to the rooftop just as Breaker and Knuckles arrived at his side. Ambase turned to face the group, and they saw he had a bloody gash on his forehead. Ambase glared at Nuru and said, “You’ve destroyed the pod.”

“At least I stopped you from taking it.”

“When did you stray to the dark side, Nuru? Before or after I became your Master?”

Ryder Windham

"Dark side?" Nuru shook his head. "What are you talking about?"

"Give me the lightsaber, boy."

Gizz drew his blaster. "Why don't you drop yours, Mister?"

Ambase ignited his lightsaber. Gizz fired at the Jedi. Ambase swung his blade at the energy bolt and deflected it into the roof. Nuru said, "Put away your blaster, Gizz. And everyone stand back,"

Breaker said, "Commander, we can take him—"

"Stand back," Nuru repeated firmly. Taking a cautious step toward Ambase, he said, "What makes you think I strayed to the dark side?"

"I know you followed me to Kynachi. I was told you're in league with the Sith. I didn't believe it until now."

"Sith?" Nuru took another step forward. "*Who* told you I'm with the Sith?"

"Come one step closer, and I'll cut you down."

Nuru stood very still. "Who told you?"

"Dooku."

Nuru was stunned. "You trusted Dooku?"

Ambase touched the wound on his forehead. "He wasn't... always."

"You're confused. And injured."

Ambase leveled his lightsaber at Nuru. "Do you deny that you sabotaged the ship at Kynachi?"

"Of course, I deny it."

"Then why did you follow me?"

"Because I feared for your life, Master Ambase," Nuru said. "I followed you because I wanted to help you."

"Help me?" Ambase's eyes rolled back, and his lightsaber fell from his hand and rolled away from him before his knees buckled and he collapsed.

Nuru went to Ambase's side. He glanced back at Breaker and said, "Get Quills over here with a med kit. Fast!"

STAR WARS: Guardians of the Chiss Key

As Breaker ran back to the Suwantek, a small cargo ship descended and touched down on the roof. A few seconds later, a hatch opened on the side of the ship, and Lalo Gunn stepped out. Surprised, Knuckles said, “Gunn? What are you doing here?”

“Got me a new ship on Vaced,” Gunn said. “I gave Chatterbox a tracking device to plant on the Suwantek so I could catch up with you.” She looked at the Suwantek and said, “What happened to you guys? And where’s Chatterbox?”

Before anyone could answer, a skylight window slid aside against the roof. A moment later a clone wearing a Republic Navy officer’s uniform pushed himself up through the skylight and climbed onto the roof. Knuckles looked at the clone and said, “Sharp, what are you doing wearing an officer’s uniform?”

Sharp looked at Nuru, who was gently elevating Ambase’s head, and then he looked at Knuckles. Sharp took a deep breath. “Before I answer that question, Knuckles, why don’t you tell me why a Clawdite was wearing my armor “

Knuckles’s mouth fell open. “What Clawdite?”

“The one I landed on when I fell through that skylight,” Sharp said. “I’d ask him to explain things for me, but it’s too late for that. He’s dead.”

Ring-Sol Ambase, Harm Kelpura, and Chatterbox were whisked to medical centers at the Jedi Temple. Afterward, Breaker brought Cleaver’s parts to a droid-repair station.

The bodies of the Clawdite and the three men adorned with Black Sun tattoos were turned over to Republic Intelligence for identification purposes. An attempt was made to deliver Overseer Umbrag’s body to the Skakoan embassy in the Senate District, but the Skakoans didn’t want it.

Nuru Kungurama, Breaker, and Knuckles talked with Sharp and Lalo Gunn in an effort to figure out, among other things, how and when the Clawdite had infiltrated Breakout Squad, and also Count Dooku’s motives for convincing Ambase that Nuru

Ryder Windham

intended to steal the Chiss escape pod. Four days later, they remained largely baffled.

Chapter Nine

Five days after his return to Coruscant, Nuru went to meet with his recovering Master.

“May I see Master Ambase now?” Nuru Kungurama asked.

“Of course,” said the droid receptionist. “Right this way.”

Hovering through the air, the droid led Nuru through the medical facility in the Jedi Temple until they arrived at a private room.

The droid quietly ushered Nuru into the room, where Ring-Sol Ambase was sitting on the edge of a narrow bunk. Ambase had a bandage across his forehead.

Seeing Ambase, the droid said, “You should be lying down.”

“You should be going away,” Ambase said.

“Really!” The offended droid hovered out of the room.

“Greetings, Master Ambase.”

“Greetings, Nuru Kungurama.”

“I just visited Master Kelpura. He is feeling much better. I hope you are, too?”

Ambase smiled. “Yes, much better. Thanks to you.”

Nuru shook his head. “I don’t deserve any special thanks, Master. After all, I did try to... well, kill you.”

“There *were* extenuating circumstances,” Ambase said, “such as the fact that I was trying to kill you at the time.” Ambase

Ryder Windham

sighed. I take it that you've reviewed my report to the Jed Council."

"Yes, Master."

"I still don't understand everything that happened. Why would Dooku go to such incredible effort to convince me that you were trying to steal the Chiss escape pod?"

"Unless Dooku tells us himself, there are a lot of things we may never know," Nuru said.

"I was informed about the Clawdite and the three men with Black Sun tattoos. Was Republic Intelligence able to identify their bodies?"

"They're still trying."

Ambase frowned. "I wish I could help you reconstruct details, but... I still don't remember leaving Kynachi or arriving at Dooku's castle in the Bogden system." Ambase closed his eyes. "How, Nuru? How could I have been so blind? How did I allow myself to be so... manipulated by Dooku?"

"I can only guess, but... perhaps because he was once your friend, part of you held some hope that you might trust him again."

Ambase smiled again. "You're wise beyond your years, young one."

Nuru bowed politely. "How soon can you return to duty, Master?"

Ambase looked out the window. "I won't be returning to duty."

"I beg your pardon?"

"I'm leaving the Jedi Order and returning to Kynachi."

"But... why?"

Ambase looked back at Nuru, "Even though I don't understand what Dooku and Ventress may have been up to, I can't blame them entirely for what happened to me. I've reviewed your report, too, Nuru, about your meeting with the Chiss Aristocra at Bilbringi Depot. I didn't mean to kill that girl

STAR WARS: Guardians of the Chiss Key

when I returned fire to her ship. But I am responsible for taking her life.”

“Master, you didn’t know what you were—”

Ambase raised a hand to silence Nuru. “Nuru, forgive me, but this war has taken its toll on me. Despite all my training, I allowed myself to be misled, to lose direction. I gave in to fear and anger. I gave in... to the dark side.

“But the dark side didn’t take you, Master. You... you came back.”

Ambase smiled sadly. “Although my memory is foggy about various periods over the past few weeks, I remember every detail of our duel in the Dacho District. I don’t like admitting it, but I never felt so alive in my life.” He touched the bandage on his forehead. “If I hadn’t been wounded, I do believe I would have killed you.”

“But you didn’t. Master.”

“You don’t understand, Nuru. I was touched by the dark side of the Force. Part of me wanted to cut you down. That is no way for any Jedi to think.” Ambase shook his head. “The war is over for me. And so is my life as a Jedi. I have a brother on Kynachi. He has a farm. I hope to find peace there.”

“But—”

“And I hope your next Master is a better Jedi than I.”

Nuru was so astonished he didn’t know what to say. He turned and walked slowly to the doorway.

“May the Force be with you, Nuru Kungurama.”

Nuru glanced back to the man seated on the edge of the bunk. “May you find peace, Ring-Sol Ambase.”

Nuru felt dazed as he left Ambase’s room. Proceeding past the droid receptionist, he made his way to the nearest lift tube. The lift tube’s door slid open, and Nuru was surprised to see Breaker and Yoda standing inside.

“Good,” Yoda said. “Found you, we have. A meeting with you, Chancellor Palpatine has requested.”

Ryder Windham

“Ah, Nuru Kungurama,” Supreme Chancellor Palpatine said, smiling as he stepped away from the broad desk in his office in the Senate Office Building. “At last we meet in person.”

Standing beside Yoda and Breaker, Nuru bowed politely. Nuru casually surveyed the office Behind Palpatine’s desk, a wide window offered a sweeping view of the air traffic that moved in neat paths across Galactic City’s skyline. Although sunlight poured in through the window the office’s red-painted walls were so strangely dark that Nuru had to blink a few times to adjust his vision.

Palpatine came to a stop in front of Nuru and said, “I just wanted to thank you personally for everything you’ve done for the Republic.”

“You give me too much credit, Chancellor.” Nuru gestured to Breaker. “If not for the other members of Breakout Squad, I never would have survived the mission to Kynachi.”

“Ah, the modesty of a Jedi.” Palpatine smiled again. “I hope the Jedi Council appreciates your efforts. While I understand why the Council may have had misgivings about letting such a young Padawan lead a series of missions, I believe your accomplishments speak for themselves. I commend you and Breakout Squad.”

Yoda remained silent. Nuru said, “Thank you. Chancellor.”

Palpatine looked to Yoda. “Master Yoda, at this time in history, every Jedi capable of leading troops is a great asset to the Republic. And I think you’ll agree that if we’re to defeat the Separatists, we need all the help we can get. Nuru Kungurama and his squad have already proven most resourceful.”

Yoda narrowed his eyes as he glanced at Nuru and muttered, “Hrrm.”

Still facing Yoda, Palpatine said, “I would never ask you or the Council to consider allowing just any young Padawan to lead missions, but Nuru Kungurama is not just any young Padawan. Circumstances have given him invaluable experience, the very kind of experience we need to preserve the Republic.”

STAR WARS: Guardians of the Chiss Key

Before Yoda could respond, Nuru said, "I do appreciate your confidence in Breakout Squad, Chancellor, but I think you overestimate my abilities."

Palpatine looked at Num. "You really are too modest. If you had the Council's permission, you *would* continue to lead Breakout Squad, yes?"

"Yes, Chancellor."

Returning his attention to Yoda, Palpatine said, "The Kynachi government requites military support to transport starship technology to our new facility at Bilbringi. Breakout Squad is familiar with the routes between those systems. Unless another Jedi is available to lead Breakout Squad, perhaps Nuru Kungurama could do this?"

Yoda frowned. "Discuss this with the Council, I will."

"Thank you. Master Yoda," Palpatine said. "I admit, I was reluctant to ask for your help in this matter, but these are extraordinary times, and we are at war."

Yoda and Nuru bowed to Palpatine, then Breaker followed the two Jedi out of the office. After his visitors had left, Palpatine went through a door that led to a smaller meeting room. He looked to a high-backed chair, on which a girl was seated. The girl had blue skin, red eyes, and gleaming, black hair.

"I apologize for that interruption, Aristocra Sev'eere'nuruodo," Palpatine said. "I appreciate your patience."

"I cannot remain here much longer,"

Palpatine frowned. "But we have so much to discuss. If our governments are to form an alliance—"

"The Chiss Ascendancy is *considering* an alliance."

"Yes, of course," Palpatine said. "Might we at least finish what we were discussing? You said you suspected there might be a conspiracy to conquer the Galactic Republic?"

"I did."

Keeping his eyes fixed on Veeren, Palpatine lowered his voice as he said, "You don't really believe that, do you, Aristocra?"

Veeran blinked. "No. Not anymore." She rose from her chair.

Ryder Windham

“Aristocra, before you leave, I hope you might enlighten me about something. The Jedi Council allowed me to review Nuru Kungurama’s report of his last sighting of you at Bilbringi. He remains under the impression that he saw your ship explode and that you were killed.”

“As I have already explained, an approaching ship fired at mine at Bilbringi. I deemed it necessary to leave no trace of my presence there. I detonated the outermost shell of my ship’s hull to distract the attacker, and at the same time made what you might call a micro-jump into hyperspace so no one could follow me.”

“So you told me, but what I don’t understand is... why do you wish for Nuru Kungurama to continue believing you are dead? And why trust me with that secret?”

“Because I have my reasons,” Veeren said. “At least for now.”

“If that is your wish, so be it. But when might you and I have another discussion about an alliance?”

“Perhaps after your Civil War is over. Now, I must return to the Chiss Ascendancy.”

Palpatine bowed deeply. “Until we meet again, Aristocra.” When he rose, he saw Aristocra Sev’eere’nuruodo was already walking straight for the door that led to the private lift tube that would deliver her to her waiting starship. She entered the lift tube, and the door hissed closed behind her.

Knuckles, Sharp, and a newly refurbished Cleaver were in the clone trooper barracks, their eyes riveted to a holovid report. The projection of the female Rodian reporter’s image vanished, but her voice continued to speak as her image was replaced by a group of Mandalorian guard examining an empty display cabinet

“But the Mandalorian government has reported the theft of a suit of Mandalorian armor from the Sundari Peace Museum three days ago, the same day a MandalMotors Pursuer-class enforcement ship went missing from the Sundari shipping docks. An investigation by Mandalorian authorities has determined that both the armor and ship were stolen by a Corellian

STAR WARS: Guardians of the Chiss Key

bounty hunter named Ranno Task, whose remains were positively identified on Vaced one hour ago. In other HoloNet News...

Knuckles switched off the holovid. "I guess that settles it."

"What settles what?" Lalo Gunn said as she entered the barracks with Chatterbox. Chatterbox was wearing lightweight pants with a matching shirt that covered the bacta patches on his torso.

Knuckles said, "The Mandalorians had nothing to do with that guy we ran into on Vaced. Still, that guy was a tough fighter, huh, Sharp?"

Sharp rolled his eyes. "For the last time, Breaker... I've never been to Vaced. Or to Chiss space. Or tangled with the Black Hole Pirates. You keep confusing me with the Clawdite."

"Well," Knuckles said, "when you think about everything that happened, it is kind of confusing."

"I'm not confused," Cleaver said. "I knew there was something odd about that trooper. When he shot Overseer Umbrag, I realized he moved remarkably faster than clone troopers."

Gunn said, "Chatterbox and I were almost certain there was something wrong with Sharp." She looked at Sharp and added, "I meant the Clawdite. No offense."

"None taken."

Knuckles said, "Gunn, I still don't get it. The Duros bounty hunter hired you to take us off Kynachi and also fly us to Vaced?"

"Yeah, and he paid pretty well, too. But after we started suspecting there was a saboteur on board the *Harpy*, I told Chatterbox about the Duros hiring me, and we decided to find out if the Duros had planted a saboteur."

Knuckles glared at Chatterbox. "You couldn't have let your pals in on this secret?"

Chatterbox shrugged.

Gunn continued, "We didn't tell anyone else, Knucklehead, because we wanted to catch the saboteur, not scare him off. But

Ryder Windham

all I found out from the Duros was that he sent Robonino to the Black Hole sector to infiltrate the McGrrrr Gang and prevent the pirates from harming anyone on the *Harpy*.”

“But *why*?” Knuckles said.

Gunn scowled. “Remind me to ask the Duros next time I see him. Anyway, when all of you were at Bilbringi Depot, Chatterbox also noticed Sharp — I mean the Clawdite — moved faster than any clone. Unfortunately, Chatterbox wasn’t able to tell you that before he got shot.”

Gizz lumbered into the barracks, carrying a large container “Hey, guys, I picked up some food for everybody.”

Suspicious, Knuckles said, “Where’d you get the food, Gizz?”

Gizz beamed as he placed the container on a table. “A waitress in Co-Co Town gave it to me. She said not to come back to her diner until after I took a bath. Lucky day! Who wants ribs?”

Before anyone could answer, Nuru and Breaker entered the barracks. Nuru smiled as he looked at his allies and said, “I’m glad to see you up and walking. Chatterbox. And, Cleaver, you’re looking much better, too.”

“Thank you, Commander Nuru,” Cleaver said. “How is Master Ambase?”

The question caught Nuru off guard, but he managed to respond, “He’s doing... well.”

Sharp said, “How did your meeting go with Palpatine?”

Breaker said, “The Chancellor wants Nuru to continue leading Breakout Squad.”

“That’s terrific!” Knuckles said. “Next time the Chancellor’s up for election, he’ll have my vote.”

Nuru said, “My future really is the Jedi Council’s decision. We’ll just have to wait and see what happens. Personally, I don’t expect—”

Nuru was interrupted by his own loudly chirping holocomm unit. He took the device from his belt, pressed a button, and a

STAR WARS: Guardians of the Chiss Key

small hologram of Yoda appeared above his hand. “Yes, Master Yoda?”

“A mission for you and Breakout Squad, we have,” Yoda said. “A freighter, the Spice Siren, has gone missing in the Tatooine system. An act of piracy, we suspect.”

Nuru was surprised. He had not expected another mission so soon. He said, “Master Yoda, may I ask... is there a reason you want Breakout Squad for this assignment?”

“Carrying munitions for the Republic, the freighter was. A secret mission, this is. And experience with such missions, you have.”

“I understand. We’ll leave at once.”

“May the Force be with you, *Commander* Nuru.” Yoda’s hologram flickered out.

Knuckles said, “We’re back in action!”

“I’ll bring the ribs,” Gizz said.

Gunn said, “Where’s Chatterbox?”

A moment later, Chatterbox emerged wearing his armor and carrying a blaster rifle. He said, “Let’s go.”

THE END

About the Author

Ryder Windham's many books for Scholastic include *Indiana Jones and the Pyramid of the Sorcerer* and junior novelizations of the *Star Wars* and *Indiana Jones* movies.

He is also the author of the nonfiction books *What You Don't Know About Animals*, *What You Don't Know About Mysterious Places*, and *What You Don't Know About Dangerous Places* (Scholastic).

He is the author of *Star Wars: The Clone Wars—Secret Missions* (Penguin), *Star Wars: The Ultimate Visual Guide* (DK), *You Know You're in Rhode Island When...* (Global Pequot) and *Star Wars: Jedi vs. Sith: The Essential Guide to the Force* (Del Rey).

With Pete Vilmur, he is the coauthor of *Star Wars: The Complete Vader* (Del Rey).

He lives in Providence, Rhode Island, with his family.

About the Type

Garamond is a group of many serif typefaces, named for sixteenth-century Parisian engraver Claude Garamond, generally spelled as Garamont in his lifetime. Garamond-style typefaces are popular and particularly often used for book printing and body text.

Garamond's types followed the model of an influential typeface cut for Venetian printer Aldus Manutius by his punchcutter Francesco Griffo in 1495, and are in what is now called the old-style of serif letter design, letters with a relatively organic structure resembling handwriting with a pen, but with a slightly more structured, upright design.